

Unit 22

Religious Conversion

Contents

- 22.1 Introduction
- 22.2 Aspects of Religious Conversion
- 22.3 Religion and Conversion
- 22.4 The Contemporary Debate on Conversion
- 22.5 Conversion and the New Age Cults
- 22.6 Conclusion
- 22.7 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should:

- understand the conversion process;
- follow the present day position of conversion;
- know the sociology of the new age cults; and
- analyse the various aspects of conversion.

22.1 Introduction

This unit is about religious conversion, and its various facets or dimensions. It will therefore be appropriate if we look into the shades of meaning that conversion conjures up in our minds. Conversion may be called a process of complete change from one set of religion, rituals and beliefs to another religion and its rituals and beliefs. It is evidently a major change for the convert and has its reverberations on the family and society at large. Conversion of the religious type has been going on since ages past and continues up to the present day. However it is only in contemporary times that religious conversion has become controversial and the general tendency is to try and put an end to conversion, especially conversion of the type in which various types of economic allurements are part of the deal to change or switch to another pattern of beliefs rites, rituals and world view.

Let us look into the meaning of conversion even it we cannot agree on exactly what it is and in fact the area within this conversion process is so great that it would not be possible to give or arrive at a definition that would be equally agreed to by all religions and religious specialists. Let us follow Malony on what the meaning of conversion itself is. This will make it much easier to understand what are the factors involved in it.

Conversion itself is a term with wide ramifications not just religious connotations. It covers the abandonment of one set of beliefs and rituals and transforming oneself to suit and be agreement with another set of beliefs rites and rituals. In the secular sphere however conversion is a concept that could apply to any serious shift of behaviour from one type or another. In fact we may make use of the concept in describing the conversion from one political party to another as the ideologies and activities of each political party is different. They have different beliefs

and ideologies and this means that the political convert has abandoned one set of belief and ritual patterns to another which could be diametrically opposite to that of the political party that has been abandoned. Similarly we can talk of people who have been for years adhering to one type of branded product, maybe a telephone company or a brand of car as converting to another brand when they exhibit this kind of behaviour. Malony cites the example of a long haired beatnik type of person abandoning that type of look with its belief patterns and converting into a well suited short haired person who is loyal to his new company where he or she is employed. Thus while conversion is applied mainly for religious connotations it is actually a general term when applied to many other significant life changes.

One significant strand of thought regarding religious conversions has to do with the convertee being subjected to mind control or brainwashing and thereby adopting an entirely different mind set. It is clear that some ideological shift to another set of ideologies is at the basis of many conversions. Yet it has been pointed out that such symptoms such as mind control and brainwashing are done in such a way that it is not obvious and done in a subtle way so that the person who has agreed to convert is hardly aware of it at the moment and may realize it much after the event. Thus a person may later regret his or her decision as soon as it starts becoming obvious to the person who has religiously converted that the new religion is not suiting him or her. By then he or she is already deeply involved in the new situation. Indeed here we may point out that there are various types of convert, ranging from the fully adapted convert to the convert who is still in two minds about his religious conversion. Another type of convert has constant doubts about his new religion and participates in the rituals and learns the beliefs only half heartedly. Yet another type of religious convert is such that even after they have converted to another religion have no capacity to continue in this new path and lapse back into their former religious beliefs. In terms of the mind control thesis we find that the success ratio is something that is very hard to estimate. Unless deep research is done we may find that conversion is further complicated by cases whose brainwashing doesn't sink in very deep and is only superficial. This often results in a relapse back to the former religions or an attempt to learn about the religion of conversion through the concepts of the former religion. There are yet another type of convert who may be called "religion surfers". This set of people are such that they convert from one religion to another, or one cult to another, staying with the new belief patterns and ideologies for a few months or years and then shifting their allegiances to another cult or religion, and go on indefinitely this way. Thus we may note even at this stage that the brainwashing thesis though attractive and even appropriate for some converts doesn't have the capacity to take in all converts because as we noted such propaganda or the teachings of the various religions and converts is not applicable to all the converts as they are of different types and capacities.

Definition of Religion

Our next point is that as Malony points out following Lemert that religion itself can be defined as "people gathered around a transempirical idea". This clearly distinguishes religious conversion from any other kind of conversion although Malony believes that the dynamics of conversion remain the same in all cases of conversion sacred or secular. It has been pointed out that conversion starts when certain questions arise in the mind of the would be convert. Malony talks in terms of various predispositions which start the conversion process. These are as follows below:

- a) the attempt to find answers to the problems and tragedies in life through a religious mode
- b) a feeling of unhappiness and frustration that does not go away by any secular means
- c) the religion that one lives with is not deemed efficacious enough

Maloney feels that such attitudes lead the world be convert to start looking around for other avenues to solve his insecurity and attitudinal problems in terms of another religion or cult. In short a transempirical idea is sought for present day problems of the individual . Such people become very vulnerable to the process of conversion as their present belief systems have collapsed and are not giving them any relief. As such they become a catchment area for those who are looking for members for their cult or religion. Malony cites a most interesting example of how this is done. The religionists and cultists target precisely those people who are already vulnerable and offer them a way out of their dilemma by promising them heaven or swarga if they were to convert to their religion or cult. Insecurity, confusion, and mixed up beliefs lead many people to seek answers from other religions or cults than the one they were born into. Here we may point out that Rambo considers the study of these phenomena as very important because his research shows conversion to be destructively oriented. Again while we have been describing the catchment area of conversion as those people whose world has no meaning and they themselves are floundering in search of support, there are others who are going through a personal crisis in their lives. These people also seek to find the answer to their frustration by changing religions or cults and we pointed out that there are some who "surf" the total available area of religion and converting from one religion to another frequently and not stabilizing in any - such people could also be called "chronic converts"

22.2 Aspects of Religious Conversion

We find therefore that many of those who convert feel that they are in possession knowledge that is extraordinary enough to be labelled as the truth. A successful conversion thus makes a person very confident and there is sometimes a feeling of overconfidence, and an ability to be able to make quick decisions. Rambo is of the view that conversion is very important because it tends to be destructive of family and other groups because it is very hard for other members of the family and group to understand such a step as conversion to another faith or to one of the many cults that have mushroomed over the last two decades.

According to Rambo we may consider conversion to be a kind of disorientation. For example we may consider that if a person belonging to religion A, decides to convert to religion B, then he or she adopts the entire conceptual and ideological baggage of the new religion or the religion to which he or she is now converted. It is disorientation because the person has been reconditioned or reprogrammed to be able to be an active convert of the religion of adoption. We find that such reconditioning, programming, and the attempt at mind control does not seem to work for many converts who begin to feel in limbo. That is to say that they are between two stools and not on either one of them.

In fact such a step has the potential of disturbing not only the family but every group that the convert now moves in. It is hard to understand by the family and the community why anyone would take such a step. Thus we have a division of society as "procultist", and another section being that of the "anticultists". The procult lobby is such that they consist of

those people who condone the action of the convert while the anticultists are those that are vehemently opposed to the act of conversion. It is pointed out by Rambo that the fact of the matter is that most people do not convert but stay with their religious grouping. The people then who do convert are those that have conflicts of a serious nature in their life. One such conflict occurs when there are people who are of parentage of two different religions and hence Rambo points out that in such marriages of a mixed type with an inbuilt choice mechanism that the likelihood of seeking to convert to either one of them becomes serious. This conflict of two religions in one marriage creates a conflict situation which has to be resolved by conversion. Nevertheless this considered to be a deviant response. The problem arises in that the society is not able to understand why anyone would like to convert to another religion. It is perplexing to those with whom they interact. Those who are witnesses to a conversion may sometimes be shocked at the change in the person who has converted. He or she bears a different personality and in many cases where proselytization is an aspect of conversion they cannot believe in the outlandish ideologies of the group to which a person or persons known to them have converted. This is one of the facts that makes the convert even more determined to pursue his or her new religion with a greater sense of commitment than ever before. Everything that a convert does is put under the scanner by family and society who is interested in pulling him back to the religion and grouping that he or she once belonged to. The fact of proselytizing cults are especially vehement that their teachings be propagated and that an important part of the converts activities includes attracting new recruits for their movement. Apart from this the various types of dress hairstyles clothes and conversation all make the convert an obvious part of the community. The anticultists insist that the convert has been brainwashed and his mind has been reprogrammed in a different way. They see such converted people as a threat to the social fabric of the family, community, and society at large and such people are naturally against anyone taking any such step and managing to be an integral part of the wider religious community.

Box 22.1 Responses to Conversion

So it is clear then that conversion is a complex issue. We find that the expectations from the convert vary with the group that he is interacting with. One type of expectation is that the change will be of attitudes, that is mainly intellectual and cognitive. They do not expect that the behaviour will undergo too many changes or transformations. In other types of groups the expectations will be largely one of the emotions. Yet another type of response to conversion in terms of expectations is that the converts will become involved with various type of ritual behaviour which may even be kept secret from the outside society.

Responses to Conversion

There are then many types of expectations and responses to conversion and there is no stereotypical response and there is no stereotypical convert. They remain individuals with a different mind set which has to be reinforced throughout their life with religious meetings, reading the books of the religion or cult converted to. As such the reconditioning of the convert continues to be reinforced by various belief patterns, rituals, discourses and sacred activities and duties. The situation becomes even more complex if the rituals of the new religion or cult demand setting aside a period of time for such esoteric practices such as meditation. That is to say a period or periods of the day when they have to set aside and cut themselves off from friend and family. Such a behaviour, where it is context specific may well be understood but when it is practiced on a daily basis supported

by esoteric arguments and beliefs, but in an alien context where the practice of meditation may mean something else it is bound to attract skeptical attention.

Rambo feels that despite a formal conversion the problem remains stable to a large extent until the practices like meditation or chants are practiced. Thus it is not only a question of the ideology of a cult or religious movement, but also the practices that are involved in them. It is only when they begin to practice the rituals that the beliefs will become ingrained and active in the persons life. However there is hardly any way to standardize expectations and responses apart from the types of response that we have mentioned above. However, this too is debated and some social scientists believe that belief is necessary and an inseparable adjunct to practice. In putting belief or practice in a sequence we may be making a mistake that has to be checked out for each convert. There is also the problem of how seriously the convert takes his new cult or religion and how fast he or she becomes alienated from it. The level and degree of sincerity are also a question that must be addressed here because it is only too clear that just as there are many approaches to a religion the degree of commitment to the new cult or religion also varies and we do not have any particular picture of a convert with which to set up a standard.

Rambo mentions that recent studies are now clearly pointing to the fact that the people who convert to another religion or to some cult are not victims of brainwashing or propaganda and are not victims in any sense of the word. Rather they want to get converted to the new religion and actively seek out opportunities to do so. We will examine the brainwashing thesis of conversion in another section and then examine it in further detail, but what is important here is that while the brainwashing thesis of conversion is an attractive tool with which to deal with the facts on hand it has a number of drawbacks and thinks in terms of victims to exotic and esoteric cults and religions. This as we have pointed out is not really the whole truth. However more on this later.

As regards why people convert this is due to many different motivations. This is because they feel it will enhance their self esteem and give them a more influential base from which to interact. Rambo says that there is no single motivation but the idea is to enhance pleasure and reduce pain. Sociologically speaking the convert as we pointed out is in a conflict situation. He or she may not feel "at home" in the society in which they are placed and therefore try to connect with it in such a manner that prestige and status are enhanced. There are different ways in which a convert is attracted to a new religion and cult and therefore some people are attracted by the conceptual systems, that is attracted intellectually while others may have a passionate feeling about conversion and so they approach it through the emotions. The fact of the matter is that different religions and different cults target those people who would be open to their suggestions in such a manner that to attract them is much easier. Consider a person who has just had a deep bereavement or has been recently divorced or lost a well paying job. The systems dominant religions are then spread out before him to take succour if the religion he or she is born into is not satisfying his or her cognitive expectations. The motivation then behind all other motivations is to find meaning in life which has been lost due to some unfortunate turn of events. In such an eventuality we find that a person is open to change. However here we enter into another caveat, and this is that of the "lost sheep", people who would convert to another religion many a time do not settle down with that religion or cult but go hunting for ever newer and more esoteric cults in search for the "lost Paradise" . There is thus an element of dissonance in such cases.

Box 22.2 Ethics and Conversion

The ethicality of conversion is yet another area of concern. Is it right to convert to another cult? Is not the convert committing as apostasy by abandoning his parent religion and moving on to another religion or cult? The question that then remains to be asked is whether the people who convert gain anything substantial by doing so?

Four Sets of Variables

According to Rambo there are four sets of variables that occur when a person converts to another belief and practice system. These are as follows below:

- a) Sociologists agree that the convert is heavily influenced in his decision to convert by his community and his peer group the people that he meets with often and whose opinions he respects greatly. These friendship circles of kith and kin have a very deep bearing on his decision to convert. Thus the conversion comes about through contacts that are personal and only secondarily through written communication or impersonal propaganda.
- b) Further we find that the groups to which a person can convert are very clear that the convert has to establish a close relationship with their leader and meet as often as possible with other members of that group who have converted sometime earlier than him. This is one of the most important tenets of these groups because in a situation where the convert has gone into a minority religion or cult there is need for constant reconditioning and reprogramming which only other members of the sect or cult will be able to provide him. Thus conversion is a fragile process and the new belief patterns are to be reinforced by the discourses of the leader and all doubts and hesitations are sought to be cleared by the leader himself or one of his close representatives.
- c) Thirdly the overall world view of the convert changes or begins to change. This as Victor Turner has noted is done by the means of rituals specific to the new religion or cult. In fact such rituals provide the basis for strengthening beliefs, and confirming the convert in his new religion.
- d) Finally the role perception of the convert undergoes a change, and they are able to perceive in a different manner, and therefore their behaviour changes. Some may become very passionate about the conversion and even seek to work wholetime for the organization, donate money to it and so on.

Reflection and Action 22.1

Interact with some of your neighbours and find out why they are pro or anti conversion. Put your findings on paper.

We may then say according to what we have written so far that there are three major types of people so far as religious conversion are concerned. They are:

- a) People with a positive attitude towards religious conversion. It is from this catchment area that most people convert for many reasons including dissatisfaction with their own religion and thereby with a lookout for any other form of ideology which would suit them. Such individuals are open to suggestion and are vulnerable to the proselitization campaigns of other religions or cults.

- b) People with a neutral attitude towards religious conversion. Such people are well entrenched in the religion of their birth. They do not see any reason to change and cannot understand why people want to change their religion whether it be to one of the major religions or a new age cult. Either way the topic does not interest them very much and they are neither pro or anti religious conversion. In short they have a tolerant attitude towards the freedom to exercise choice of religion. However such individuals do not want to get involved in the issue at all.
- c) People who are totally against conversion and feel that conversion is a conditioning process which the convert has to imbibe and internalize. Such people are those that evaluate and criticize conversions to other religions and cults. other than the religion of birth.

It should be clear by now that conversion is a complex and complicated phenomena which is capable of disturbing the life of the family and community. Let us then see some of the dynamics involved with religion and conversion.

22.3 Religion and Conversion

Before proceeding further let us clarify what we mean by a convert and what we mean by proselyte. These are two useful terms which will help us conceptualize the issue of religious conversion much better. A convert is a person who has adopted the beliefs and rituals of another religion or cult and owes allegiance to them and the umbrella religion or cult. On the other hand proselyte is term used for a person who has wholly absorbed the ideology and rituals of another, to him "new" religion.

Let us then see the position of some religions on the possibility and the dynamics of such religious conversion as we have been discussing. Let us first see what it is to convert to Judaism. On examination we find that the law of the Jews lays down precise guidelines for conversion to it. The process of such conversion is known as "giur". The guidelines to conversion state first of all that the conversion to the Jewish religion must follow a change of heart and not be so for pecuniary and political gains. Such conversion is then initiated by a faith flowering in the direction of the religion to be embraced. That is conversion is to be sought without thinking of gains of any kind. A convert to Judaism has to undergo a ritual circumcision, and commits himself to be obedient to the 613 commandments and the laws of the religion. Also in Judaism there is no room for conflicting ideologies and the convert must totally abandon his previous beliefs and rituals. Further the "mikvah" or the ritual immersion in a pool of water has to be undertaken. The convert also leaves his old name and identity behind and takes on a Jewish name to signify the break with the past religion. He or she is now considered to be in the new family and is a son or daughter of the patriarch Abraham.

Differences in Conversion Procedure

Now let us see what are the differences between the Jewish and the Christian viewpoint on the conversion process. Judaism is in fact an entire culture and not just a religion. The Hebrew Bible is lenient towards the process of conversion and the convert is given special attention so that he can fit into the new lifestyle of the Jews and is helped overcome the feeling that he or she is a stranger. They have to be taught the new ways of behaving and comporting themselves. It is also a fact that since 300 CE Judaism stopped encouraging or welcoming converts to Judaism. We see then that in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism and those that still

conform are expected to conform to the rigours of Jewish religion. For example the Tanach or Hebrew Bible covers the history of the Jewish people in terms of their commitment to God. Judaism is more than a religion as it touches all aspects of the Jewish Civilization.

Christianity considers itself to be universal and this creates a fissure between itself and the Jewish religion. As a claim to universality we find that Christianity has to keep in mind its relations with other religions and cults. Christians believe that Christianity is an outcome of God's promise to Abraham as also to Israel, which would be a "blessing" to the nations of the world. This leads to further areas of exploration and has several implications. For the Jews the convert is basically adopted by the religion and the Jewish civilization but in Christianity the process of conversion is based on faith in the new religion of one's adoption. However there is an overlap here because like in Christianity in Judaism also the faith component is very clear, and has a social component in that the convert attends Christian churches and such other conglomeration from time to time.

Box 22.3 Conversion to Christianity

What are the requirements for conversion to Christianity? In fact proselytization has been an intrinsic part of the Christian religion and Christians have since time immemorial not only accepted converts but is actually active in seeking them out. With its claim to universality Christianity has it as part of its charter to convert the entire world into Christians. Thus in the New Testament, Jesus commanded the Christians to go out to all parts of the world and convert them to Christianity. Thus evangelism has been part of Christianity since Christ's time itself. Here we find that according to the Christian faith that conversion is an act of God. No matter what is the type of evangelism it cannot make the holy spirit descend on a person who wants to convert until the grace of God that makes this a reality.

In the biblical times the disciples of Christ all were Jews. Christ even performed miracles for those not in their religion without they being converted in Christianity. In the early times of the Church there were many rules and regulations that the convert had to observe. Thus the Christian Baptism which requires dipping into water is similar to the Jewish requirement of a convert to dip into water which was the act when a "new" spirit descended into the convert. Christianity and Islam are both active in the field of preaching their faith and actively seeking converts to their religion.

We find that in the case of conversion to Islam, that the conversion to it is simple if one sincerely believes that Allah is the only God and that Muhammad is his messenger. If this shahada is taken the person may be considered a Muslim. The new convert then has to familiarise himself with the beliefs ideologies and rituals of Islam bit by bit to whatever extent the convert can do so.

Let us dwell now on conversion to the religions of the Asian subcontinent. Here the first fact to notice is that Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism do not preach but nevertheless allow people to join their fold in order to gain more members. The feeling in these religions is that all paths lead to the same truth. Here it is very important to note that these religions even allow a person to be multi religious. In Japan which is a Buddhist nation it is possible to follow both Buddhism and Shinto. In India there are some people who claim be both Hindu and Buddhist, or both Hindu and Sikh. Such an attitude makes conversion unnecessary. But this does not apply to Sokka Gakki and ISKCON.

This brings us to an observation of how conversion works in the new religious movements and cults. These are in many ways the area of conversion and are also very active in preaching their faith and attracting members or adherents. This is also an area which is very controversial. Thus those with an anticult attitude tend to criticize these movements and even use strong words like thought reform or brainwashing of a potential convert until she or he is convinced totally that he or she is converting in his or her own interests. There are definite procedures of conversion but they are not made public and the converts are asked to keep the esoteric exercise and rituals a close secret. As such though we know that new age religions and cults do seek converts we cannot tell everything that a convert undergoes to be accepted. What we mean to say is that new age cults initiate their members to meditational and other activities of which the exact procedures to be followed are not revealed to the public at large. We may then say that conversion to new age cults is possible once their ideology and belief patterns have become internalized by the aspiring members. We also find that research has shown that where there is a lukewarm involvement in mainstream religion, the cults become active and the catchment area for converts is much higher. Interestingly we find that in the USA a disproportionately high number of converts to new religious movements are of Jewish origin.

In contrast to our arguments above we find that there are certain religions like the Yasidis and Zoroastrians do not believe in accepting any converts. The only way to acquire identity of these and such religions is by ascription that is to be born into them. On the other hand we also find that cults like the Shakers groups do not allow procreation so all their members have to be converts.

Proselytism

A word here about proselytism would be in order. Proselytism is the effort to change the beliefs and actions of a person in order to change his religious point of view. Christians especially are active in proselytisation of potential converts and the Bible has given explicit permission, indeed a directive to do so. Thus in the Bible Jesus says "Go to all the Nations and make disciples. Baptise them and teach them my commands". This is also known as the Great Commission of Jesus.

We find that the views of people, groups and communities differ on the activities that come under proselytisation and evangelism. One view is that proselytisation and evangelism are part of the freedom of speech, and it is a justifiable activity. The other point of view is that such activities are harmful and derogatory and since they are a nuisance they should be disallowed. However if we consider this situation dispassionately we realize that there are several aspects to this conglomeration. These are:

- a) There should be freedom to change religion not just once but several times if the potential converts choose to do so. In such a freedom of religion the would be convert is not under any pressure to convert except by taking his own stand on the issues concerned;
- b) There should be freedom of association and all people must feel free to have religious inclinations and form a cult if they so desire. In fact it is this freedom of association which has led to the mushrooming of new and old cults;
- c) Further we have the freedom of speech caveat which allows people from new age cults to talk to others about their experiences and so be able to reach out and convert people to their beliefs and lifestyle.

Keeping these rights in mind it is clear to see that new age religious movements are here to stay and even strengthen and broaden their base. The very foundations of the conversion process are built into our modern society which has great stress and strain, and where often people lapse into meaninglessness by just following a mechanical routine which takes them from office to the home and back to the office. Thus it is also very clear that converts are intending to lead a meaningful and happy life and will not let anything stand in the way so far as their conversion processes are concerned.

Yet it can be argued that the very rights that we have been mentioning are a double edged sword, for my freedom cannot come in the way of your convenience or try to destroy the other person's belief system. As such there is little room for coercion and force in conversions, or to try and bait them by means of pecuniary benefits, health benefits and so on. Again there is the question of the "captive audience", which can be made to listen to any kind of evangelism and cannot avoid it. This happens in the case of the army or the classroom which should not be made an area to propagate one's views to those people who are then forced to listen.

Box 22.4 Conversion Controversy

Let us before going further recapitulate the facts that we have set before you. The question of religious conversion looms large before every religion. Some religions are very strict about conversion to the extent that their members are commanded to make new converts and much of the missionary work all around the world is based on this premise itself. Then there are religions or new religious movements which require converts to keep floating. We gave the example of the shakers who do not allow their followers to procreate and are thus entirely dependent on the conversion mode to stay afloat. There are furthermore religions in which conversion is a matter of choice and one can be a believer in more than one religion. Thus conversion remains a controversial area of endeavour and we shall see in the next section some reports that indicate that the controversy has far from died down and is at the centre of religious debates across the religions.

In Hinduism conversion is understood in a different way and is closely linked to the notion of karma - which is to say that those who convert have past birth tendency to do so. One can be a mainstream Hindu and yet at the same time believe in a cult and be a practicing member of it. In the following units you will notice that being a member of any cult is not regarded as an offence, and in fact many of these cults have been spreading a form of Hinduism itself all around the world. Thus there is a vast gap between the Hindu and the Christian viewpoint so far as conversion is concerned. In the case of Hinduism the member is born into the religion and there can be no converted Hindus. However in fact certain mass conversions to Buddhism have been advertised for the Dalits and others in India which are then followed by reconversion back into mainstream religion. That is many new religious movements do not pose a threat to mainstream religion and are in part a reinforcing mechanism. Thus for a Hindu it is easier to choose some new religious movement and not be in conflict because the basic ideology of karma, dharma and artha, do not come into conflict with the mainstream religion on which the cult does its own interpretations and reconditions the person to believe in the esoteric side of religion which is not evident at first sight in any religion. A case can be made out that the cults from India are in fact various takes of the mainstream religion and its text. Moreover it would also be very difficult to conceive of Bhagavad Gita, Vedas and so on as belonging to any specific cult, even though they may try to appropriate it for themselves and their members.

22.4 The Contemporary Debate on Conversion

We have been pointing out various facts about conversion till now but it may be pointed out that we should not miss the point that conversion to other religions is very controversial. Thus conversion to another religion by Hindus en masse is deemed to be very threatening. It is to this we now turn after providing an example of attitudes towards conversion in the Asian subcontinent.

Sri Lanka has expressed the interest that it would like to follow the Tamil Nadu Government which has passed an anti conversion legislation. The government of Sri Lanka is trying to pass a law to take punitive action on those who are attempting to convert people with various types of force or inducements. Indeed this is a very serious matter for to force a conversion with inducements is ethically wrong. In India itself religious conversion is a controversial process. When looked into superficially we may say that to change one's religion is a fundamental right. The argument goes further and argues that conversion to another religion is the only solution for the poor or dalits of India. It is mooted as the only way in which the dalits can join in the mainstream of the Indian nation. However this is a moot argument and there is no definite evidence that conversion is the answer to the plight of the dalits.

Anti conversion Laws

On the other hand while there is pressure for anti conversion laws many religious leaders have been talking of scrapping any proposed anti conversion law. Thus many Christian, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders have gone on record saying that it is a human rights issue. They presented a memorandum to the President of India saying that anti conversion legislation is wholly in opposition to 'freedom of faith' that is guaranteed against the secular Constitution of India, and is also against the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

Turning once again to Sri Lanka we find that it is very serious about enacting an anti conversion bill into the parliament. The response to this move by international funding agencies such as the Becket fund was that if such a legislation went through and became law they would cut off tsunami related aid to the country. This is understandably so because the bill proposes up to seven years imprisonment to anyone found trying to convert people to another religion than the one he or she already has allegiance to. Becket Fund authorities have pointed out that such legislations would put gravely in danger any 'faith based' aid and relief at a point in time when it was gravely needed. In the case of Sri Lanka the Constitution does not guarantee any fundamental right to propagate a religion, and if such activities were taken up the conversions to Christianity would cause grave damage to Buddhism which is the dominant religion in Sri Lanka.

Box 22.5 Ban on Religions Conversion

Similar concerns in India about Hinduism have been expressed by different quarters. In another case in Rajasthan the Rajasthan government wants to ban religious conversion. This stand became very clear following a Christian Mission's Meeting in Kota which is 155 miles from the state capital Jaipur. The foreign delegates were informed and warned that their visas did not permit them to join this gathering. On the other hand the Christian mission alleged that some of their members had been physically assaulted. The Hindu activists alleged that the Convention was being used as a cover for inducing religion conversions. They set up roadblocks on the way to Kota to

prevent the delegates from reaching their destination. It was pointed out by the Hindu activists that over 60 foreigners were at the Kota convention and they did not have the visa permit to be there. A day later Hindu activists had to be dispersed when they tried to prevent people entering the premises where the Convention was to be held. The emphasis as always was that the activists would not allow any poor and illiterate people from being converted. This example shows that religious conversion is a very seriously emotive issue as it involves abandoning one religion and joining another.

Some writers like Parmeshwaran have questioned the very morality of conversion so far as India is concerned. His fear is that Hindus, mainly illiterate and poor are being targetted by the Christian missionaries and being offered to convert to Christianity. What is more the missionaries are offering monetary and job inducements for making the converts. This is further no secret and the Christian missionaries have already spelled out their plans for conversion in the subcontinent. Thus Parameshwaran points out that this 'manifesto' of conversion is a basic policy so far as the Christian churches are concerned. The Christian churches have what is a common platform in evangelisation of the east. The agenda is to Christianize the entire world.

Tribals in India

It is occasionally pointed out that most tribals in India are neither Hindu nor Christians and therefore they have the right to choose their religion. However the idea of 'buying' people by offering them various economic and job allurements is indeed a debatable procedure. Further the idea that the tribal population by large is not Hindu is controverted by the fact that tribals have been worshipping Hindu deities from the Hindu pantheon. The north east of India has received special attention from the missionaries and they have been very successful in that not only has the population taken up Christianity as beginners or acolytes but they have themselves produced a large number of missionaries. This is entirely in line with what is successful conversion, that is not only does a region convert to Christianity but they take to it with such enthusiasm that they themselves now want to convert others to their adopted religion.

We now turn to the final section of our unit and examine the 'brainwashing' thesis with regard to the new age cults, which though allied to the Hindu religion are in fact variations of the same with greater stress on activities like meditation. No doubt they too seek disciples and converts but the impact on the overall social fabric tends to be peaceful and even overall ameliorating to the rest of society.

22.5 Conversion and the New Age Cults

As we have noted earlier there are at least two points of view so far as cults in the new age are concerned. One is a positive or pro cult viewpoint, while the other is the anti cult viewpoint. In this section we are going to present and analyse one of the major anti cult theories which is also known as the 'brainwashing thesis' so far as cults are concerned. It is held by the votaries of the brainwashing thesis that cults and their members are involved in putting propaganda in the minds of susceptible individuals and thereby making them convert and become active members of that cult. In short the accusation is that cults exercise mind control over their members and that most converts have been made to see the cults point of view, which in turn renders them totally under the control of the leadership of the cult. In other words conversion into cults is involuntary and the cult membership is comprised of membership which has behavioural

and attitudinal changes induced using persuasion and propaganda. Such converts exhibit a reduction in autonomous behaviour and the assumption of a new identity based upon their new mind set. They also tend to show a dependency syndrome on the leadership of the cult and cult members. Some sociologists have asserted that this is very deleterious, and that 'psychospiritual' aspects of conversion, leads to a cult member to become mentally somewhat deficient and as a result not being able to concentrate or make independent decisions about his or her life. The indoctrination mechanisms are so strong that the new disciples show total commitment to their new group of allegiance.

Action and Reflection 22.2

Talk to some people who have changed their religion and note down why they converted.

This is also known as the extrinsic model of conversion, and it alleges that the disciples, acolytes and recruits are literally coerced into total allegiance to the cult's leader or leaders. The extrinsic model of conversion has several features basic to it and it is to this aspect that we now turn. To begin with Anthony and Robbins point out that the disciples are wholly in the power of the cult, and there is no question of the exercise of one's own decisions. This as we have noted is deleterious in itself as it makes inroads into the mind of the member and forces him to think along the lines of the cult ideology. Next is the extrinsic models total negation of the argument that there may be converts who were self motivated and joined the cult on their own motivation without any additional input from the cults propaganda machine. In other words this model indicates that there is no such thing as voluntary conversion into a cult. This is in fact taking an extreme stand on the issue of conversion because of all the members of a cult in the new age we find that there are surely a good percentage of converts who wanted to convert and the new conditioning was itself welcomed by them. That is to say they invited the cult philosophy to enter their mind in full cooperation to change their allegiances from their previous religious committment to that of the cult that they have joined.

Extrinsic Model

Next the extrinsic model goes on to state that hypnosis and trance states are induced so that the would be convert becomes hyper suggestible and is easily able to adjust his or her viewpoint to fit that of the cult. Such hypnotic trances, the extrinsic model urges have severe consequences for the personality of the new convert and those who are already established part of the cult. These processes are allied with any other process which could be used to subjugate the member and to wholly set aside any notion of free will. This is especially so in the new age cults where it is the leadership of the cult which decides everything for the cult membership. The leader or teacher cannot have his decisions questioned or challenged and in the overall monarch or patriarch who takes care of the members desires and guides them through their difficulties and confusions for their own good. Part of the conditioning of the new age cults is that the teacher or guru is a wholly enlightened being and has direct access to the supernatural and is the sole route to salvation from suffering. Thus to posit a man or woman as the route to godhead or nirvana is itself a questionable attitude, but it is at the very basis of the other beliefs. Thus the first commitment that a convert makes is to regard the cult teacher as the primary influence in his or her life. There is no other person who has such exalted status in the life of a devotee than his or her spiritual teacher and his position is even higher than God whom he is in

direct touch with. As such this type of central attitude around which the entire cultic philosophy revolves can and has led to broken marriages and broken homes since the entire hierarchy of the converts social life is made mono minded in the centre of which stands the image of the guru.

Further the model explains that the very process of intellection is impaired by this type of extreme indoctrination where the guru or spiritual teacher is the most important person in a devotees life. The normal way of thinking is thus subverted in a convert and he is unable to give up the crutch of the guru even though he is usually a distant figure to seen at discourses. One of the ploys that cult members use while indoctrination or brainwashing is that the teacher is available for consultations or removing doubts of a spiritual kind from the mind of a confused member. Over time the cult member realizes that he is only a cog in the propaganda machine and he is supposed to help in bringing more members into the fold alone. The guru is a distant figure who hardly knows even the names of those who are in the outer circle of the movement. Coupled with exotic customs and behaviour patterns these cults have their members even touching their foreheads on the feet of the teacher to show respect and allegiance to the movement. The process of intellection is thus twisted beyond recognition for those individual members who happen not to belong to a culture where such touching of feet of the patriarch and others is mandatory. The fact that these cultists follow such practices itself indicates that they have lost their free will and the power to think rationally. All explanations are subsumed to have been taken with the 'grace' of the guru and the whole idea in fact is to lay down or surrender one's entire life in the service of the guru or leader. Thus the cult members form in fact a kind of cadre which takes commands from above and has no rights but only obligations towards the leader and the other members.

The extrinsic model also indicates that this process of indoctrination ends up putting wrong ideas in the mind of their members who pose to be the chosen ones of the Lord and are destined for quick salvation unlike the people who are not part of their group. The point is that this is not done just at the occasion of indoctrination for membership but continues as and when members meet each other or gather together to hear discourses or discuss them. We can then say that indoctrination into cults is a lifelong procedure and continues from before the time the person was made to convert up until the very end of his or her association with the group.

Box 22.6 Conversion and Identity

Most importantly we find that the member's identity undergoes a change towards a cultic identity and moves away from what was his or her original or authentic identity. This last is a very strong indictment of the cult philosophy, which is that it destroys a persons very identity and makes him or her undergo a personality change which may not fit in with the home or work environment. There are many fallouts of such identity change and have led to many marital breakdowns and many a time in cult violence. This type of indoctrination and brainwashing thus damages the original personality of the member and tries to give him a new cultic self in which the whole way of thinking is skewed towards praising the leadership and organisation. The original self with its importance to family and relatives and friends is pushed over and there have been cases where those who were not able to properly make the transition to the new cultic self have actually gone mental, or shifted their allegiance to yet another cult where they feel they might fit in better.

How far can we go with this model of cultic conversion? Is this position wholly or partly correct? That is to say does a convert into a cult actually lose his mind or does he find his true identity in his role of disciple of the cult he has joined? It will be quite clear in the units that follow that each cult has its ideology and is in competition with many others at the same time. We will notice in these units that the brainwashing model does not apply to most members of the cults we have chosen to present in the units that follow. However the brainwashing argument though it cannot be taken too far has the germs of a critique of all authority since it is very clear that to belong to any organization or cult is a matter of acquiring the culture and the way of living and thinking that is prevalent. Further to posit that all converts are brainwashed is taking the argument too far as there are many confused people in the world who seek solace through one or the other of the cult philosophies. In such people there is no original self and it is easy for them to acquire a cultic personality entirely through their own efforts at meditation or chanting, yoga, sufism, and so on. So if there ever was an authentic self it would not get influenced by the ideology of a cult. It is only because most people and especially young people are in search of an authentic self that they venture into cultic areas. In this they are not always successful but some of them definitely do integrate into the thought support systems of the cults. It also gives them a father or mother figure to admire. It is surprising however that many a time the programming does not suit an individual or it is felt that the new area of cultic exploration may in fact be detrimental, and so they dissociate from the cult or do not go all the way in their convictions of the professed divinity of the leader of the cult.

22.6 Conclusion

We have seen in this unit that conversion to another religion or conversion into a cult is an area where there are many different viewpoints, even negative ones. However we need to distinguish the type of cult we are dealing with, and certainly there have been dangerous cults in the past and some of them continue to persist. Thus those cults that espouse violence as a way of life (or death) are obviously not beneficial to the social body. There are cults however that professes love, non violence, peace, tranquility and so on and have benign meditative procedures and respect shown to the teacher. Such cults it can be argued are all about providing meaning into the life of people who feel that they no longer have a mooring in their religion or that it is too large and impersonal. Such people find the benign cults (as against the malignant cults) to be a boon to them otherwise they would have nowhere to turn. In short far from being threatening the benign cults of which we will be presenting four in the forthcoming units, form a catchment area for those who would like to become more serious about their religious quest and go in for popular activities such as meditation and yoga and have a haven to retreat into. Moreover, the converts too are of different types, and those that are simply drifting or surfing cults soon drop out. Cults provide a very colourful part of religious endeavour and provide an opportunity for spiritual growth, and are instrumental in making people adjust not only to themselves but to the encapsulating society. As such no blanket statements can be made about cults as a whole and without doubt there are cults which have helped millions of people and will continue to do so. However we have already pointed out that we must separate with given criteria, the benign from the malignant cults and the serious cult members from those who are on the sidelines of the movement. There is no necessary seriality between joining a benign cult which is good both for the members and the encapsulating society, and mental breakdown, or loss of identity. It is only the malignant cults which have given the cults a questionable

status with some academics, but as a whole the benign cults are in fact an intrinsic part of the world social fabric and are here to grow and to stay. With this unit on religious conversion we invite you to the next four units of this block, which deal with benign cults that are doing a lot of good in the world, both North and South.

22.7 Further Reading

Dawson, Lorne 1988. *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. Toronto. Oxford.

Robbins , Thomas and Susan Palmer, eds. 1997. *Millenium, Messiahs and Mayhem*. New York. Routedledge.

Snow, David and Robert Machalek. 1984. "The Sociology of Conversion". *Annual Review of Sociology* 10:167-190.

References

Religious Conversion in www.grohol.com/wiki/Religious_conversion

Religious Conversion at [//en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_conversion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_conversion)

Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins at www.censur.org/2003/brain_conv.htm, "*Conversion and 'Brainwashing' in New Religious Movements*"

Narayan Bareth, *State to Bar Religious Conversion* at

[//news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/South_asia/4290843.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/South_asia/4290843.stm)

Newton Henry Malony, "*The Psychology of Religious Conversion*" at

www.religiousfreedom.com/Conference/japan/Malony.htm

Parmeshwaran, P., *Religious Conversion - Is it Mora?* At

www.vigilonline.com/records/meetings/relconversion.asp

Rambo Lewis, *The Psychology of Religious Conversion* at www.religiousfreedom.com/conference/Germany/rambo.htm.