

# Introduction

## Beyond the Conversion Controversy

On December 11, 2014, then Parliamentary Affairs Minister M. Venkaiah Naidu of the reigning Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) raised a storm of criticism when he proposed a ban on all religious conversions throughout India. At issue was the alleged forced conversion of some two hundred Muslim families to Hinduism by activists associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Agra earlier in the same month.<sup>1</sup> It was, if nothing else, savvy politics: once Naidu had changed the conversation from the converting practices of this activist group to conversion as such, the secular Congress party quickly went on the defensive. “Can Mr. Naidu stop anyone from converting willingly to any other religion?” asked Congress leader Digvijay Singh, “It will be an infringement of fundamental rights conferred by the Constitution. It is the fundamental right of an individual to choose his/her religion.”<sup>2</sup> Two weeks later, *The Hindu* newspaper ran a “Sunday Anchor” feature with articles considering the social and political issues raised by the issue. Its title was “Conversion Confusion.”<sup>3</sup>

This was not the first such episode in the so-called “conversion controversy” in India and the wider South Asian diaspora, nor would it be the last. Indeed, to at least some extent, this controversy has shaped Hindu-Christian relations since the arrival of Vasco da Gama on the shores of India in 1498. The controversy has, however, acquired a distinctive shape in the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries, corresponding closely to the full consolidation and eventual dissolution of the British colonial project.<sup>4</sup> Beginning perhaps with the polemics of Swami

Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883) and his founding of the Ārya Samāj in nineteenth-century Gujarat and continuing through Mohandas K. Gandhi's (1869–1948) exchanges with Bishop V. S. Azariah in the mid-1930s, the real and imagined threat of Western missionary powers cast a long shadow across the movement for Indian independence from colonial rule.

Eventually, the debates of Dayananda and Gandhi on conversion became woven into the very fabric of the sovereigntist project. During and well beyond the independence struggle, various affiliates of the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar movement added a militant dimension to their critique, echoed and fostered in part by such Hindu apologists as Ram Swarup (1920–1998), Sita Ram Goel (1921–2003), and Arun Shourie (1941–).<sup>5</sup> Several rites of reconversion, “purification” (*śuddhi*), or “welcoming” (*parāvartan*) had been developed by Dayananda and others in the nineteenth century, and these were deployed aggressively by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and other activist movements in the 1980s and 1990s to stem a perceived tide of conversions to Christianity and Islam, by directly converting non-Hindus or, more commonly, as a means of integrating or “Sanskritizing” those marginalized caste groups and *Ādivāsī* or tribal communities believed to be particularly vulnerable to Christian mission work.<sup>6</sup> Several Indian states enacted anti-conversion legislation, from 1967 to the present day.<sup>7</sup> In 1998, the BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee called for a “national debate on conversions” in light of Christian missionary work in *Ādivāsī* communities, and this call was punctuated—not coincidentally, in the view of some—by the brutal murder of the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons in January 1999 in a tribal region of Orissa. The flames of the controversy have been fanned more recently by, among other factors, the 2008 anti-Christian riots in Kandhmal and the return of the BJP to power with the 2014 election and 2019 re-election of the Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>8</sup>

This controversy can be understood in multiple ways, from the philosophical to the political to the sociological or ethnographic. A good case can be made—and has been made—that the public conversion controversy has far more to do with the complex interplay of the social divisions of class and caste than anything specific to Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the question has

often been posed, and debated, on theological terms, and thus invites theological engagement.<sup>10</sup>

In this book, I attempt such an engagement through a comparative Hindu–Christian study of mission and missiology. Though I have titled the study *Hindu Mission, Christian Mission*, I undertake my comparative inquiry in reference not to “Hinduism” as such but to only one of its many strands: the non-dualist tradition of Advaita Vedānta, as embodied in the teaching of the eighth-century teacher Śaṅkara and his many, diverse successors in the medieval, modern, and contemporary periods. Advaita was among the first and most successful traditions to articulate a theology of worldwide mission in the late nineteenth century, a theology expressed most clearly in Swami Vivekananda’s (1863–1902) repeated calls to “conquer the world through our spirituality.”<sup>11</sup> I contend that the distinctive theologies of mission articulated by Vivekananda and his successors have deep roots and a complex development from the medieval period to the present day, and that they offer both a significant challenge and intriguing points of resonance with missiological proposals emerging from contemporary Catholicism and the mainline ecumenical movement.<sup>12</sup>

Both sides of the comparative inquiry attempted in *Hindu Mission, Christian Mission* are by design limited and particular. For reasons to be explained more fully in chapter 1, I judge that it makes good practical and methodological sense to seek clarity on a broad point of interpretation by attending to a single, delimited case study. As Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan once put the matter, “[I]t seems a mistaken method to seek generalization before one has tried to understand the particular.”<sup>13</sup> In this case, I hope to demonstrate, a single, sustained, comparative inquiry can point us beyond some of the false oppositions of the conversion controversy toward a more holistic, fruitful encounter of distinctive missionary theologies and their visions of integral transformation. If successful, this study will open space for other such studies, engaging a fuller range of similarly distinct missionary traditions of Hinduism, Christianity, and other religious paths.

The argument of the book proceeds in two major movements. Part I, in three chapters, provides an initial description and defense of “missionary Advaita” as an historical phenomenon and interpretive category. As a first step in the analysis, chapter 1 lays the

methodological ground for a comparative theology of mission, suggesting several scholarly developments that point a way beyond ossified positions on both sides of the conversion debate in India and abroad. Chapter 2 goes on to trace the historical emergence of Advaita Vedānta as an explicitly missionizing movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It does this by establishing “historical markers” that profile the distinctive character of several Advaita organizations, as well as defining successive stages in the development of a broader, relatively coherent mission movement. Chapter 3 shifts the attention from these contemporary movements to their roots in the ancient and medieval rivalries among *sampradāyas* or teaching traditions in the broader Hindu stream. Drawing on the Christian missiological scholarship of David Bosch, M. Thomas Thangaraj, Stephen B. Bevans, and Roger P. Schroeder, this chapter attempts to articulate the most distinctive “paradigms” and “styles” of Advaita mission from the tradition’s remembered past. Such paradigms reach from the “compassionate teacher” of eighth-century teacher Ādi Śaṅkarācārya through the “servant-conqueror” of the late medieval Śaṅkara hagiographies to the image of the Buddha in the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, and they are further enriched by the various styles of missionary witness symbolized by Śaṅkara’s four legendary disciples.

In part II of the book, four chapters move from this descriptive analysis toward a more explicitly comparative and constructive engagement. In each chapter I trace distinctive points of engagement that characterize these Advaita traditions and, in and through their careful exploration, bring them into dialogue with selected currents of Christian missiology. Chapter 4 explores the frequent appeal to “pure experience” as a transcultural ideal and key to the translation of Advaita Vedānta into new contexts and new idioms. No figure is more closely associated with an experiential approach than the sage Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950); hence, the Maharshi serves as a focal point for the inquiry in this chapter, both through his distinctive reinterpretation of such ancient authorities as Śaṅkara and the classic Advaita treatise, the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, and through his subsequent contestation and retranslation by other missionary Advaitins. After this, in chapter 5, I engage the transformation of “locality” in missionary Advaita, focusing particularly on the creative rereading of the Śaṅkara hagiographies by Swami Chin-

mayananda (1916–1993) and the international Chinmaya Mission. Rather than simply shedding a traditional emphasis on the sacred geography of India in favor of a universalized, transcultural ideal, I suggest that these Advaita teachers and disciples engage in a more complex hermeneutical process, imaginatively relocating the sacred geography itself so that it comprehends the universal reach of their movements.

Having addressed questions of translation and quantitative, geographical extension in chapters 4 and 5, in chapter 6, I trace a more qualitative extension of Advaita mission from a strictly interior, spiritual liberation to include embodied concepts of empirical, social, and political liberation. Of special interest in this chapter is the gradual emergence of Advaita as a form of political theology, including the vigorous engagement of Transcendental Meditation and the Natural Law Party in traditional electoral politics and the more radical Advaita theology of liberation propounded by the ostensibly traditionalist Advaita theologian Anantanand Rambachan. Chapter 7, finally, returns to the question of conversion. After exploring several narratives of conversion in Advaita traditions, I suggest that metaphors of Sanskritization and non-dualist belonging can reframe the imaginative construction of such conversions from the language of shifting allegiance to that of transformation, purification, and integrative ascent

One purpose of part II, and of the volume as a whole, is serious, sustained engagement with Advaita theologies of mission in their distinctiveness—beyond the polemics of the conversion controversy or these theologies' too-easy dismissal as mere imitative reversals of evangelical Christianity. I thus hope that the exposition and analysis in these chapters may advance the study of late modern and contemporary Advaita traditions, on their own terms. At the same time, my own purpose in studying missionary Advaita is ultimately constructive. Hence, in the concluding section of each chapter of this second part of *Hindu Mission, Christian Mission*, I take the additional step of offering comparative reflections. Chapters 4 and 5 consider themes of translation, recollection, and pilgrimage as aspects of Christian mission, and chapter 6 engages the political theologies of the Chinmaya Mission, Transcendental Meditation, and Anantanand Rambachan with comparable Christian theologies of social responsibility and "integral mission." Finally, in chapter 7,

I attempt to learn from Advaita models of conversion by looking at recent scholarship on the Christian convert *par excellence*: Paul the Apostle. Such scholarship, when read in the light of Advaita mission, opens the door to reconsidering Christian mission in terms of “Christification” rather than conversion.

It would be naïve to presume that the politics of the conversion controversy can be resolved by a single comparative inquiry, conducted mostly in the settler state of Canada by a Catholic theologian of North European ancestry who also happens to be a student of Advaita Vedānta. Indeed, as the comparativist Francis Clooney has noted in another context, it may be too much to ask of comparative theology that it engage every issue or social conflict. Not every important question is properly theological.<sup>14</sup> “We need to be careful,” Clooney writes, “since it does no service to theology to use the word too broadly, or in contexts where, despite what we wish, it no longer obtains.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the conversion controversy is a matter best left to journalists, social scientists, and political leaders in India and abroad.

I readily concede that theology may not be everything. Neither, however, is it nothing. If, as I contend in this volume, both Advaita Vedānta and Christianity offer robust theologies of mission that challenge and clarify each other in significant ways, then the encounter of these theologies may help us think more productively about Hindu–Christian relations, about the disputed question of conversion and, ultimately, about mission itself. That, at least, is the wager I am making in this study. Readers can decide for themselves whether it is a wise bet.

Feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle  
July 2023  
Williams Treaty Territory