



Conversion or Conversation?

ROLAND E. MILLER

I recently attended church in India with a Muslim convert family, Alavi and Yasmin and their two daughters. Alavi is one of the most well-known representatives of new Christian believers from Muslim background, and his heroic story has been widely circulated. Pastor Alavi routinely uses the word “convert” and takes pleasure in the theology of conversion. Through his efforts many other Muslims have been moved to consider the same experience. About the same time, in a public function, I released the autobiography of one of the leading Muslim intellectuals in South India and a former university president (vice-chancellor). With him I was often in conversation over the years. The most poignant memory is sitting together under the tropical stars as he shared memories of his beloved wife who had recently died.

Conversion *and* conversation. But is not our topic conversion *or* conversation?

Sharp contrasts are often an aid to clear thinking. They do not always represent reality or truth, however. Sometimes they urge what is inherently inappropriate or incorrect—the either/or decision. In fact, reality and truth may involve a both/and commitment.

The current state of thinking in the Christian church in regard to interaction with people of other faiths tends in the direction of false alternatives. Thus, for example, some believe that one must choose between conversion and conversation. Whole theological positions and missiological movements are formed on the basis of this watershed. The net effect is distorted discussion, loss of the principle of

The theology of deep friendship, the friendship of God for humans, leads to both conversion and conversation, no longer seen as an either/or—though both terms need to be rescued from their unfortunate stereotypes.

wholeness, less than healthy inter-Christian relations, and above all remoteness from reality.

The point of this article is to argue that there is a case for conversion, a case for conversation, and a case for a movement from “or” to “and.” The Christian engagement with Muslims highlights the issues in trenchant fashion.

THE CASE FOR CONVERSION

Conversion is here understood as a goal of Christian evangelistic communication.

If there was ever an argument for praxis determining or modifying traditional theology, the Christian communication of the gospel to Muslims would constitute

“from the Muslim point of view conversion to the Christian faith is quite misunderstood and vehemently sanctioned”

that argument. From the Muslim point of view conversion to the Christian faith is quite misunderstood and vehemently sanctioned. It is regarded as a blasphemous act that God will judge on the last day. The act impugns the unity of God and rejects the divine blessings. In some contexts it is also regarded as a treasonable activity, and Muslim law outlines the drastic legal penalties it entails. The essence of the blasphemous act is the rupture of the fabric of the sacred community that God has chosen and graced. So serious is the sin considered to be that traditional Islam has even pre-empted the eschatological judgment of God by turning it into a case for immediate communal action against the erring person, ranging from social ostracism to death. Moreover, in this light, any encouragement given to conversion by others, any proclamation of the good news, is looked upon as an unfriendly activity. In the white heat of this context the intra-Christian argument regarding conversion or conversation seems abstract.

How is the evangel-sharer to deal with such a reality? Is there still a case for conversion? Should there not rather be a case for nonconversion? Against this background what are we to make of our Lord’s urgent call to a change of mind and to a decision, presumably a public one, to follow him and his way? “The time is fulfilled,” he declared, “and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). The call of Jesus was unequivocal and compelling. Although it did not make life easy for them, the apostles accepted it for themselves and encouraged others to the same response. In a passage that incorporates two key biblical terms (*metanoein*: to change the mind, and *epistrephein*: to turn), Peter addressed his listeners in Solomon’s portico: “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” (Acts 3:19). The case for conversion begins with Jesus and the early church. A Muslim who hears this call, however, must weigh its force against the implications of the Muslim community’s serious misunderstanding of its intent and significance.

This fundamental call to change is not only misunderstood and rejected by Muslims, but for quite different reasons it is disliked by many people within contemporary Christian society. To them conversion has an archaic, an embarrassing ring. In such thinking the term deserves to follow “proselyte” to the ash-heap of unsophisticated, discordant, and imperialist times. Within that general opinion there is a range of viewpoints. Those to whom any religious conviction seems like an anachronism naturally find religious conversion to be equally so. Others, who still honor religion in general, hold that the sharing of its values across boundaries and within an “I’m okay/you’re okay” frame of reference will lead humanity upward in its positive religious development, whereas conversion thinking will distract from that process. Although committed Christians may not share these views, some among them take what they regard as a pragmatic approach. They believe that peace-making among the religions must now be the global priority. Who can doubt its importance in the light of the Hindu-Muslim conflagration in India? Any disturbing factor, conversion among them, must be de-emphasized in the interest of achieving harmonious relations. In a similar view, it is believed that it is now more important for religion “to clean up its act” and to recover its good name rather than to be preoccupied with gaining accessions.

In giving due consideration to these arguments and their assumptions it becomes necessary to review the meaning of the term conversion. As we have seen, in the process of linguistic development it has taken on a negative coloration when applied to the religious experience. It is ironic that thereby religious expression is placed under a constraint that contemporary society does not accept in general.

“The primary meaning of conversion is distant from building institutions and increasing numbers. An institutional transition is a consequence that often occurs, but it is not conversion in the spiritual sense.”

The term “conversion” literally means “a turning to” something. It may involve a change in attitude, character, form, or function. The basic idea of change runs through all of life and is inherent in the concept of human growth and freedom of choice. A teacher attempts to turn a student from ignorance to knowledge. A business person tries to turn attention from other products to those that he or she represents. A politician seeks to convert the public to a certain way of thinking in order to capture the vote. Conversion is everywhere. It is accepted and encouraged. It is a presence in everyday colloquial language. “I’m converted,” someone may say, “I really like that toothpaste more than the other one!” It is not therefore the idea of conversion itself that is considered inappropriate, but only its application to religious change. Such opinion stems not only from a certain worldview but more importantly from the failure of Christians themselves to hold up spiritual transformation as the primary meaning of conversion.

The primary meaning of conversion is distant from building institutions and increasing numbers. An institutional transition is a consequence that often occurs, but it is not conversion in the spiritual sense. In its true Christian significance, conversion implies a turning to the living God. It is a penitential turning that recognizes human unworthiness and dependence on God's grace. "Restore us [turn us], O God, let your face shine that we may be saved" (Ps 80:3). Conversion is the discovery and experience of God's love in Christ. It is "a personal reorientation"¹ in response to that love, which Christians believe is enabled by the gracious working of God's Spirit. This is a long way from transferring religious allegiance, joining a new institution, altering modes of piety, or changing party hats. Since conversion has to do with the welcoming love of God it may therefore be called "theo-formation." God desires our return to the divine embrace, our liberation from the power of evil, and our release to the life of love. With self-giving love God woos us and wins us to that reorientation. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God....We love because he first loved us....The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:16-21).

Theo-formation, then, has spiritual consequences. Chief among them is its creation of a relation with others who have had the same experience and who also view themselves as Love-restored people. The common words to describe them include "the called-out ones," "the body of Christ," and the "followers of God." They are the company of those who take up their cross and follow Jesus into the path of deep friendship. The double relationship with the saving God and the grateful and serving people of God is a transforming one. History is full of examples of how such transformation has enriched the world. Setting aside the current parodies of Christian conversion, we may well argue on empirical grounds that spiritual conversion has brought a huge benefit to the human race. Despite the many failures of the followers of Jesus to emulate their master, they have been a channel for the movement of his love into the life of humanity. The world is poorer if that channel is blocked. In that light it may be suggested that, along with economic Free Trade Zones, what the world needs even more is a spiritual Free Trade Act that the gospel "may have free course" (2 Thess 3:1 KJV).

What has brought severe confusion to the discussion of conversion is its second-level reference to a change in religious status. Among the choices and actions that a new believer in Jesus may consider is the decision formally to bear the name Christian. This is not as automatic as it may seem at first sight, because there is mounting evidence of the existence of a mass of informal followers of Jesus in different parts of the world. It is often hard to remember that the word "Christian" was probably first used in Antioch as a form of mockery. When the reified term "Christianity" was born is not clear. There were obviously many conversions be-

¹Paul Löffler, "The Biblical Concept of Conversion," in *Evangelization, Mission Trends 2*, ed. G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1975) 25.

fore there was an official institution with that name. Nevertheless, certainly within a century, the use of the term Christian became common in the Roman Empire,² and its corollary, Christianity, also eventually emerged. Thus the concept of turning to God in spirit became bonded with the joining of an organization or accepting a religion.

In today's common parlance this secondary meaning of joining the church has tended to outweigh the primary spiritual connotation of conversion. When linked with the concept of religion, the term conversion is reduced to a change in religious status. My wife, who is from a United Church of Christ background, was floored when another pastor's wife innocently asked her: "When did you convert?" Colloquially the term has taken passage from its natural spiritual home into social and institutional realms. It is at the latter point that Muslims meet it, finding that meaning recognizable and comfortable in terms of their own communal approach to religious affiliation. They identify conversion as a change in religious affiliation, with baptism as its instrument. The Muslim sociological definition is in fact not far from the secondary Christian usage. Where does this leave us?

As we consider the beautiful concept of turning to God the following points occur:

- We need to distinguish between conversion to God in Christ and joining the church. It is time to emphasize the former and to de-emphasize the latter in order to save both the teaching and the taught from the captivity of the religions.
- Conversion has an inevitable and uncontrollable quality because of the attraction of Jesus' personality, the power of his inviting word, and the promise: "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17). It is not subject to abstract disquisition about appropriate action or even a careful weighing of consequences. Converts simply say, "The love of Christ compels us," and they wonder at the hesitation of older Christians.
- To the current view that conversion is out-of-date, out of place, and counterproductive, we must uphold its central significance. Paul Löffler, after reviewing the biblical evidence, concludes: "Fellowship minus the passion for conversion leads to ghettoism; service minus the call to conversion is a gesture without hope; Christian education minus conversion is religiosity without decision."³
- Christians are obligated to issue God's loving invitation to all of God's creatures. What others do with the invitation must be their free choice. St. Paul says, "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel....I am entrusted with a commission" (1 Cor 9:16-17). Of that trust, Kenneth Cragg

²Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. and ed. James Moffat (1908; New York: Harper, 1961) 412.

³Löffler, "Conversion," 42.

declares: "Admissibility to the faith of Christ is the ecumenical birthright of mankind, never to be superseded or curtailed."⁴

- The corruption of conversion in its secondary sense needs to be addressed by setting aside practices that are unethical, that create needless hostility, and that turn conversion into an instrument of worldly success; and by establishing relationships within which interreligious disagreements can be addressed, understood, and tolerated, if not resolved.

But that point takes us to conversation.

THE CASE FOR CONVERSATION

If the concept of conversion tends to suffer from caricature and misuse, the idea of conversation suffers from suspicion on the part of its doubters and overconfidence on the part of its proponents. The case for conversation must then be made against both its detractors and its enthusiasts.

Conversation is a wider term than dialogue. Religious dialogue in turn is conversation applied to religious reality. It is also, however, "converse," that is, life relationships, dialogue in life. For this discussion, I will take conversation and religious dialogue to be virtual synonyms. Despite its increased acceptance religious dialogue attracts continued suspicion from those who see it as a misdirection

"the idea of conversation suffers from suspicion on the part of its doubters and overconfidence on the part of its proponents"

or even an outright abnegation of the basic kerygmatic task. On the other hand, it also suffers from overconfidence on the part of those who regard it as more or less the contemporary fulfillment of the Christian task in relation to people of other faiths and a timely substitute for older views of mission. The case for conversation, however, overtakes both suspicion and overconfidence.

Conversation belongs to the wholeness of the Christian relation with people of other faiths, a wholeness that includes service, evangelism, peace-making, and reconciliation in addition to dialogue. During the past decade I have chaired the Christian-Muslim dialogue group of the Lutheran World Federation, which, in April, 2002, in Indonesia completed the last in its current series of dialogues.⁵ In carrying out this work the members of the group did not consider that they were engaging in something that stands in critical contrast with the task of proclaiming the gospel. There was no sense of antithesis, but rather a sense of striving for the whole counsel of God. Conversation is something that takes place

⁴Kenneth Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective* (London: Lutterworth, 1966) 215-216.

⁵See *Christian-Muslim Dialogue. Theological & Practical Issues*, ed. Roland E. Miller and Hance Mwakabana (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1998). For the relation of evangelism and dialogue, see Paul Martinson, "What Shall We Do?" in *Lutherans and Religious Pluralism*, ed. F. W. Klos et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 174ff.

among human beings, and conversation about religious realities and about cooperation for the common good is more important than casual discussion about the weather.

We will take a moment to define the nature of such conversation. In my opinion no definition has ever surpassed that of Reuel Howe. Dialogue is:

that address and response between persons in which there is a flow of meaning between them in spite of all the obstacles that normally would block that relationship. It is that interaction between persons in which one of them seeks to give himself as he is to the other, and seeks also to know the other as the other is.⁶

In this light we might summarize dialogue in the religious realm as “real conversation.”

A prime example of real conversation is Jesus’ discussion with the Samaritan woman. There was a flow of meaning between them despite the cultural obstacles. There was both self-revelation by Jesus and self-awareness on the part of the woman as they made deep contact with each other. The case for conversation, as the case for conversion, begins with Jesus and his sensitive yet open communication with the variety of people with whom he came in contact.

As we consider conversation we recognize that it is not a choice, except for its direction. Its inevitability rests in the fact that it belongs to the essence of human

“there is no conversion to God in Christ that is not at the same time a conversion toward God’s creatures, toward their existence and their concerns”

existence. Human beings, unless they be hermits, are in a dialogical relation with each other. Dialogue is also an aspect of human existence before God. It belongs to the divine-human relationship. From the moment that God’s voice addressed Adam in the garden to the end time when the victor declares to his servants, “Surely, I am coming soon,” communication is solidly grounded in the biblical witness. Moreover, its constant and effective presence in the missiological experience of the church is so strong that the case for conversation hardly needs to be made. But does it need to be made in terms of dialoguing with Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists?

In that regard it is helpful to note the intimate link of conversation with conversion. That linkage takes place at both ends of the conversion spectrum, that is, at the point of the changed person and the changed task. The follower of Jesus in his or her conversion has been turned toward humanity as well as toward God, has become a converser. There is no conversion to God in Christ that is not at the same time a conversion toward God’s creatures, toward their existence and their concerns. The conversion demonstrates itself in a new form of conversation: “When

⁶Reuel Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1963) 37.

did we see you?" they will ask. And Jesus will answer, "Did you have converse with the needy?" The seeing and the doing are on a continuum and are in harmony. The linkage is not only with the changed person, but with the changed task of the changed person. That task is to bring people into contact with the God who saves and with the savior who brings rest to the weary. With Muslims and Hindus we begin with the seeing, and in today's world that is a very great demonstration of loving one's neighbor. Both seeing and conversing are transcending acts of love. The desirability of conversation is generated with the new birth of the children of God.

The case for conversation faces not only the question of desirability but the question of possibility. Since non-Christians do not share with Christians a theory of communication based on the Word Incarnate, they observe the Christian interest in religious dialogue with some bemusement. To them it is a Christian thing. This accounts for the fact that almost all religious dialogues have been initiated by Christians at the formal level. Nevertheless, non-Christians have been moved to cooperate with the Christian initiative, and have often done so graciously, with competence, and with a growing recognition of its value. Dynamics following September 11, 2001, for example, have moved Muslims into a new level of concern for conversational engagement with Christians. Thus, the physical possibility of religious dialogue increasingly exists at formal as well as informal levels. But does the intellectual possibility exist, that is, can we actually have meaningful conversation that results in real communication, that avoids both artificiality and shallow compromise, and that leads to helpful outcomes?

The doubt comes from academicians as well as missionaries. Academicians question the possibility on the grounds of fundamentally differing starting-positions that make moot all attempts at real conversation. Thus the distinguished Islamicist, Charles Adams, declares:

To the extent that similar doctrines or positions prevent us from seeing the more far-reaching differences inherent in the way in which doctrines and concepts combine into an integrated whole to form a perception of man, of God, and of their relations with one another—to precisely this extent—such similarities obstruct understanding. The matter of importance is the thrust of the whole, its distinctive character. Here the difference is so great that one may well ask whether in truth there is any hope of Christian-Muslim dialogue ever progressing beyond the stage of registering the difference with one another.⁷

With a breath of realism this scholar sweeps aside some of the romantic clouds rising from the industry of professional dialogists, and dissipates some of the bland assumptions of relativist theologians. There is a response, however, that can and must be made. The theoretical response is that partial understanding is both possible and worthwhile. The practical response is come and see; the experience of participants is that conversation can be fruitful indeed.

⁷Charles Adams, "Islam and Christianity: The Opposition of Similarities," in *Logos Islamikos*, ed. R. M. Savory and D. A. Agius (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984) 206.

That is also the experience of those who wonder whether conversation is a displacement of conversion. One evangelical scholar asserts: "It is apparent that in recent dialogue the very serious danger exists of losing sight of the goal of winning men and women for Christ." But he goes on to suggest: "On the other hand, there is little question that 'dialogue,' which denotes the means of discovering another person's beliefs, is a legitimate starting-point for evangelism, and has been so used since the time of Christ." He concludes by saying: "Surely we evangelicals must encouragingly relate to the experience of one who said: 'Many of us in Christian-Muslim dialogue...have been pushed back to rediscover the richness of our Christian faith....By feeling the thrust of our neighbor's criticisms and hopefully by resolving these, our own Christian faith is strengthened even though we may have incurred risks.'"⁸

In conclusion, we may underline these outcomes of real conversation:

- It creates a positive atmosphere. Let us call it an atmosphere of possibility. There is a certain wonder that develops from dialogue, the wonder that despite great dissonance Christians and Muslims, for example, can actually meet together and discuss serious issues of faith and life.
- It dispels ignorance and clarifies faith. Is it not remarkable how little people really know about each other? Dialogue produces knowledge, important knowledge about current emotions and contemporary problems.
- It leads to self-understanding. Not many people know how they are viewed by others. Fewer admit that they have a log in their own eye that needs removal. Still fewer recognize that they can learn from others. Conversation produces self-awareness.
- It establishes relationships. The fact of being together in a discussion—with an occasional cup of tea—not only enables acquaintance but leads to genuine personal relationships that go on to friendship and real sharing.
- It opens doors. Doors to what? Perhaps to something noble. Perhaps to a cooperative solution. Perhaps to a better future. The Spirit knows. For the Christian in conversation the open door may in hope include an engagement with the one who dialogued so remarkably with Nicodemus and who knocks on the door of every human heart.

With this point the case for conversion and the case for conversation become visible in their complementarity rather than in their artificial distinction. For there is no mutual discussion of human problems and there is no interaction on the street of life that will not eventually lead to an examination of the condition of humanity.⁹

⁸Daniel R. Brewster, "Dialogue: Relevancy to Evangelism," in *The Gospel and Islam*, ed. D. McCurry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979) 516, 525.

⁹See *Guidelines for a Dialogue between Muslims and Christians* (Rome: Secretariat for Non-Christians, n.d.) 119.

THE CASE FOR A MOVEMENT FROM “OR” TO “AND”

There is a case for conversion and there is a case for conversation. Both are valid and both are needed. The discussion must therefore move from “or” to “and.” The “and” raises the question of their relation. The relation of the two is not that of a necessary and inevitable tension that may at times be creative. It is much

*“conversion and conversation are two fruits blossoming
from one trunk”*

closer to the picture of two fruits blossoming from one trunk. What is that trunk that then provides the unity of its fruits? It is the trunk of good wholistic evangelical theology that may not yet have completed its full growth. But I would argue for a more explicit articulation—it is the theology of deep friendship, the friendship of God for humans, that leads to both conversion and conversation.¹⁰

As friends of our fellow humans we point them to the friendship of God. The knowledge of that friendship is precious, and it is our most precious possession that we share with our friends. Its great power moves humans to change their minds in the direction of Christ. And it is the same friendship of God that moves us into conversation with our fellow humans, a converse that is characterized by the self-giving love of Christ. He described it simply, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

The sap of this trunk flows through all the urgent efforts of Christians to draw their fellow human beings into that new relationship of love that the Friend has initiated—that is the case for conversion. And it is the same sap of the same trunk that flows through every effort to seek understanding and rapprochement with fellow human beings whoever they may be, and a common culture of goodness that reflects whatsoever things are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and worthy of praise—that is the case for conversation. One trunk, one life-giving stream, for those to whom the master speaks: “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14)—with the promise of more fruits to come. ⊕

ROLAND E. MILLER is emeritus professor of missions at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling* (1995).

¹⁰The material in this article, and in particular the theology of friendship, is expanded on in the author’s forthcoming volume, *Muslims and the Gospel. The Task of Christian Communication with Muslim Friends*.