

“THIS BOOK IS A major contribution to the growing field of conversion studies. While many studies of conversion begin with a concern with theories of conversion, Iyadurai begins with the profound experiences of people whose lives have been impacted by their encounter with the holy. Iyadurai introduces us to the voices of Christian converts in India. This beautifully written and compelling book is rooted within the matrix of the vast and complex world of contemporary India. Iyadurai joins the ranks of scholars like William James who remind us that conversion is first and foremost an experience of real people who are captivated by transcendent forces that both shatter and reshape lives.”

LEWIS R. RAMBO, author of *Understanding Religious Conversion*

“DRAWING ON NUMEROUS oral history case studies, elicited empathetically from ‘new’ Christians of all walks of Indian life, Joshua Iyadurai exemplifies the fine art of ‘thick description.’ As a phenomenologist, he eschews normative judgment. Thoroughly conversant in theory and methodology for the academic study of ‘conversion,’ Dr. Iyadurai also articulates an approach distinctively his own. Like me, other readers may find his originality most intriguingly evident in his endeavor to faithfully discern the ‘spark,’ as he calls it that ignites the experience of deep, personal change his informants find transformatively meaningful. Of special interest to scholars of ‘conversion’ in cross-cultural, extra-European contexts, is how very thin the membrane is (as it were) that separates the natural from the supernatural in the lives of Indian ‘convert’ Christians. It is this openness to the in-breaking of the Sacred that kept my interest as a scholar and challenged me as a Christian.”

RICHARD FOX YOUNG, editor of *India and the Indianness of Christianity*

“IYADURAI HAS GIVEN US the gift of these conversion stories drawn from the religiously complex sub-continent of India with its plethora of religions and complexities of castes. In doing so, he helps us understand the complex nature of conversion in our own cultural setting. Iyadurai gives voice to the converts themselves, letting them tell their own stories in all their richness and messiness, and only then does he step in as a theologically trained social scientist to help us interpret the process of conversion. This is a fine book, rich in insight and based on research, which anyone engaged in the ministry of evangelism should read.”

RICHARD V. PEACE, author of *Conversion in the New Testament*

TRANSFORMATIVE
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Transformative Religious Experience

*A Phenomenological Understanding
of Religious Conversion*

JOSHUA IYADURAI



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Chennai, India

TRANSFORMATIVE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion

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Published in the United States in 2015 by Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Published in India in 2017 by
Joshua Iyadurai
Marina Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion,
Chennai, India.
www.mcisr.org

ISBN 13: 978-93-5267-486-2

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Iyadurai, Joshua.

Transformative religious experience : a phenomenological understanding of religious conversion / Joshua Iyadurai; foreword by H. Newton Malony.

xii + 265 pp. ; 23 cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 13: 978-93-5267-486-2

1. Conversion—Christianity. 2. Experience (Religion). 3. Phenomenology.
I. Malony, H. Newton. II. Title.

204.2 - DC23

To
Hema,
My wife, love, and friend

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Foreword

NOT SINCE WILLIAM JAMES'S *The Varieties of Religious Experience* have readers been afforded such rich descriptions of the personal reports of conversion experiences. And, in addition, these experiences are recounted from within a cross-cultural context, i.e., India. James's reports were largely from within the English-speaking world. While dynamics across cultures may have similar features, there are qualitative dimensions of religious experiences that are different where conversions occur in environments where Christianity is not the dominant religious tradition. All the people the author interviewed came from non-Christian backgrounds.

Further, through the application of the phenomenological method and structured interview construction, the author has given us unequaled details of personal reflections in his case studies. He intended to allow each person to fully describe and reflect on the process of conversion as well as the impact of the experience in their lives—and he succeeded. While some may become frustrated with the detail in these accounts, he was nevertheless very successful in probing the process of religious conversion within daily life. It was rather remarkable that he was able to provide an interview atmosphere of trust that would result in such introspective openness.

The plan of the book is itself somewhat unique. It actually follows the author's intent to let these experiences speak for themselves. Many books on conversion fit examples into models that are superimposed on the events. This volume follows a sequence of experiences stemming from the reports themselves. Visions, dreams, voices of the divine, solutions to problems, answers to prayers—these are the ways all converts would speak of their experience. They would rarely, if ever, superimpose such constructs as friendship associations, anxiety, social groupings, assimilation, etc. on their conversions.

This does not mean that the author was unaware of the various social/psychological models that have been used by scholars in understanding such experiences as conversion. Such models include my personal

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conviction that conversion is an example of *psycholinguistic labeling*.¹ The final chapter of the book summarizes these models and illustrates how these anecdotal reports from India could be understood from within them. The author does a worthy incorporation of this literature into his own unique taxonomy of the conversion process that still retains his intended “phenomenological” flavor.

I predict that this volume will take its place as a notable contribution to our continuing efforts to understand religious experience as grounded in the conversion process.

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1. H. N. Malony, “Conversion as Psycholinguistic Labeling: A New Model for Church Ministry,” *Theology News and Notes* (Spring 2003) 19–21.

Acknowledgments

FIRST OF ALL, I am profoundly thankful to the converts who opened their lives to me so I could explore the complex phenomenon of religious conversion in India. Their fascinating narratives sustained my interest in this field and resulted in the present volume. I thank Dr D. Christopher, Mrs Mary Philip, Mr G. Richard, Mrs Christina, and others who introduced the converts to be part of my study.

I am grateful to Dr. Joe Mannath, my doctoral supervisor at the University of Madras, Chennai, South India, for his guidance, encouragement, and his keen interest in bringing the fruit of the research to publication. I thank Dr. Henry N. Malony for his foreword and his insights in shaping the research from the beginning, along with Dr. Richard Peace of Fuller Theological Seminary. I am indebted to Dr. Peace for his continued interest in my research all these years and his valuable comments on my book proposal. I am fortunate to have Dr. Lewis R. Rambo, editor of *Pastoral Psychology*, interested in my research ever since my article appeared in his journal. I thank him for his comments on the book proposal and his support in finding a publisher, along with Dr. Robert Johnston of Fuller Theological Seminary.

A special thanks to Global Research Institute (GRI) at Fuller Theological Seminary for the grant to write this book. I thank Dave Scott and Rachel Paulus for their warmth and support in making my time at GRI profitable. The Langham Partnership (formerly John Stott Ministries) financially supported the initial stage of my research at Fuller and Langham Literature made a publication grant; I am thankful to Langham. I am happy to express my gratitude to those who provided financial support: my mother, Mrs Susily Iyadurai, Chris and Irene, Pento, Sathyabalan *annan*, Beula *akka*, and someone who never disclosed his/her identity. I appreciate the prayer support of many for my research and the publication. I am grateful to John Wipf for his keen interest in getting my book published by Pickwick Publications. My special thanks to Nathan for copyediting the manuscript, and I record my appreciation to Jim, K.C., and others at

Acknowledgments

Wipf and Stock for their role in bringing out this volume. I thank Springer for giving me permission to use the material that appeared in *Pastoral Psychology*. I thank Hema for her comments and corrections.

I am extremely thankful to my wife, Hema, and my daughters, Jedidah, Jerusha, and Jemimah, for their inspiration, support, and cooperation. All these years, they had to put up with my preoccupation with the research and my long spells of absence, especially when I was away in the USA in 2004 and 2012. I am enormously grateful to them, and the debt I owe Hema is too great to express.

Introduction

Would you . . . preach the Gospel to a cow? Well, some of the untouchables are worse than cows in understanding.

—M. K. GANDHI (1999, P. 77)

Unfortunately, I was born a Hindu untouchable—there was nothing I could do to prevent it. However, it is well within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu.

—B. R. AMBEDKAR (QUOTED IN DAS, 1980, P. 108)

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IS A political act in India that comes with multiple backlashes. Gandhi was interested in a change of power from the hands of the British to high-caste Hindus (Ambedkar). But group conversion to Christianity by the Dalits, the oppressed people in India, and the announcement to convert by B. R. Ambedkar, a messiah of the Dalits and the one who drafted the Indian constitution, rattled Gandhi's dream of controlling the majority of the indigenous people in the name of religion after the British. The Dalits found the gospel to be real good news that provided a new identity and dignity as human beings, that were denied them by the caste Hindus. Gandhi could not tolerate this upsurge and Ambedkar's determination to liberate the Dalits from the high-caste Hindus by leaving Hinduism amass, so he compared the Dalits to cows. Gandhi even threatened to introduce legislation to prevent conversion when India attained independence. However, later Ambedkar did convert to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, along with 500,000 Dalits. Recently, legislation similar to what Gandhi threatened to introduce has been proposed in India with the emergence of right-wing Hindu political forces.

In this context, conversion studies in India have been largely preoccupied with the sociopolitical dimension of the complex process of group conversions or conversion movements. The spiritual dimension has been ignored in the heat of political debate on conversion. Some studies, in order to avoid the conflict of religions over the problem of conversion, have attempted to portray group conversion as a means of liberation and social emancipation, minus the spiritual or religious dimension. But this perspective undermines the Dalits, as if they were impotent spiritually.

Further, there is hardly any rigorous academic study on individual conversions in India. While conversion studies in India have been preoccupied with the sociopolitical aspect, conversion studies in the West have been primarily from the field of psychology, dealing with individual conversion within Christianity or to cults. Recently, sociology and anthropology have stepped into the study of conversion in various cultural contexts. Sathianathan Clarke (2003, p. 290) pointed out, "If the phenomenon of conversion should include the psychic structure, developmental stages, and overall well-being of converts, there needs to be much more work in the area of psychology of conversions [in India]." Both in the West and in India, I find that conversion is not studied from a phenomenological perspective to bring to light converts' own perspective on conversion. A phenomenological understanding of conversion takes the actors' understanding of their experience into consideration in defining the process of conversion.

The purpose of *Transformative Religious Experience* is twofold. The primary purpose is to demonstrate that religious experience—in other words, the *divine-human encounter*—is central to religious conversion and triggers personal transformation, because converts attribute great significance to this factor. The secondary purpose is to let the reader hear the voices of converts in their own words, as the subtitle, *A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion*, indicates. In the West, conversion studies are largely based on Judeo-Christian samples and, in recent times, on conversion to Islam in the West. Contrary to this trend, this book deals with conversion experiences to Christianity from different religious traditions in India. It carries rich narratives of conversion as data for researchers to explore further in this area, and for others these narratives have inspirational value. The unique multicultural and religiously pluralistic context of India makes this book unusual and challenges some of the present understandings of religious conversion. For the Indian audience, this may be the only book to promote converts' own perspectives on the

burning issue of religious conversion in India. Some narratives in this book expose the cultural and familial hostilities to conversion in India and show how converts handle such hostilities. *Transformative Religious Experience* also highlights the role of religious practices, such as prayer and reading the Bible, in the conversion process. The continued interaction between converts and the divine, through prayer and reading the Bible, signals an intimate relationship between converts and the divine that sustains them in their newfound faith.

Defining religious conversion is a challenge for scholars who study it. I prefer the term “transformative religious experience” instead of “religious conversion,” as it keeps the focus on the religious experience in conversion. However, both terms are used interchangeably here. Transformative religious experience is a complex phenomenon. Many definitions are proposed; however, they lack coherence in presenting a comprehensive view of religious conversion. William James in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/2004, p. 171) defined conversion by saying, “a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.” James’s definition was based on his analysis of conversion experiences in Christianity that were primarily regenerative spiritual experiences. His definition does not address the aspects of converting from one religion to another or the absence of a “divided self” before conversion. Rambo (1993, p. 5) defines conversion as “a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations.” Rambo considers the surrounding world while defining religious conversion. He acknowledges the presence of the divine, in line with other studies (James, 1902/2004; Ullman, 1989; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). However, these studies, except James’s, have not analyzed explicitly the divine–human encounter in the conversion process. From a phenomenological perspective, we can understand that transformative religious experience or religious conversion is both a complex process and an event—the divine–human encounter—that triggers personal transformation, an ongoing process that is sustained by religious practices and socialization that leads to the integrated well-being of a person and a change of religious beliefs.

Many psychological and sociological studies on conversion are reductionistic in nature, explaining away the religious or spiritual elements in conversion. Other studies, though acknowledging the presence of the divine in the conversion process, fail to give a significant place to religious

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experience even though converts attribute great significance to it. Existing studies on religious conversion approach the phenomenon from their discipline's boundaries. Theology might tend to ignore the psychological, sociological, and cultural elements in the conversion experience. Psychology views conversion only from its vantage point and ignores the religious dimension. Sociologists treat conversion as a social issue while ignoring other dimensions. The need is to have a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the conversion process (Rambo, 1993). As a scholar trained in theology, I designed a study from a phenomenological perspective while drawing insights from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and theology.

Transformative Religious Experience enables us to understand religious conversion from a phenomenological perspective. The phenomenological method takes the experience of a person as it appears and as a whole, "examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Phenomenology looks for the meaning of an experience while staying committed to "thick" descriptions—detailed descriptions of the phenomenon as it appears. Wulff (1995) asserts that phenomenological psychology redeems *experience* to the center stage in psychological studies. Rambo and Reh (1992) suggest six elements of phenomenological approach to conversion: observation, description, empathy, understanding, interpretation, and explanation. Observation in phenomenology is seeing something as it appears. Description is taking the experience as genuinely experienced with its details of context and process. Empathy is seeing the phenomenon from the participant's perspective or entering the world of the experienter. Interpretation means seeing the phenomenon from a researcher's perspective, which may be different from the participant's perspective but not necessarily superior. Explanation is viewing the phenomenon from existing theoretical perspectives. I have adopted these elements in seeking to understand the complex process of conversion.

Bracketing or *Epoche* is an important step in phenomenological research. It means identifying one's own prejudgments, biases, and preconceptions. "In the *Epoche*, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). By identifying the ideological position, it helps a researcher look at things as they appear. In the phenomenological study of conversion, Rambo and Reh (1992) suggest that researchers should set aside their ideological convictions in order to see

conversion experience in a new light. They argue that recognizing and expressing one's biases will contribute to objectivity.

Let me state my theological journey so you will know my position. I grew up in a Protestant Christian home as member of the Church of South India (CSI). CSI is a unified church of several denominations that came together to form an Indian identity in 1947. It is close to the Episcopal Church in structure. During my college days, I was associated with an evangelical student movement that shaped my basic theological concepts. These concepts were reinforced when I later joined the movement as a staff. My theological education in a leading evangelical seminary influenced me toward a rationalistic approach to Christianity. My higher education under Catholic scholars in a prestigious state university opened my mind to other perspectives on theology. This exposure enabled me to see various theological positions from their perspectives and appreciate their merits rather than simply disapprove of them. Interactions with people from various traditions and my readings on conversion helped me recognize many ways of looking at conversion. Nevertheless, I was skeptical about Pentecostal or other claims of supernatural experiences. As I ventured into my research, in order to see conversion experience as a true phenomenologist I tried my best to set aside the rational bent of my evangelical orientation and my skepticism of Pentecostal and supernatural experiences. On the other hand, hearing converts speak of their conversion experiences and the price they paid for their conversion drew me closer to believe them. Though I do not identify myself as a Pentecostal, towards the end of my research I became sympathetic to considering Pentecostal or supernatural experiences favorably. I believe I have moved closer to the participants of my study. I say this so you will be able to identify my biases popping up here and there. I strongly agree with Rambo and Reh (1992, p. 245) that "no researcher can attain perfect, detached objectivity."

I have developed an interdisciplinary model of transformative religious experience by giving due significance to the meaning converts attach to the divine-human encounter in religious conversion. I call it the Step Model of transformative religious experience, which carves a space for the religious experience and religious practices in the conversion process, while accommodating the psychological and sociological factors. The Step Model is flexible enough to accommodate various types of religious conversions. The phenomenon is so complex that the steps cannot be precisely demarcated to a definite, clear beginning and end. However, the steps enable one to make sense out of the complex reality of the conversion process.

The Step Model of transformative religious experience has seven steps: Exposure, Disenchantment, Crunch, Pursuit and Test, Hostilities, Participation, and Maturation (see the Step Model figure in chapter 10). They indicate different phases in the conversion process. They are usually sequential, however, there is a possibility of skipping some steps in the conversion process. The Spark—the divine–human encounter—is central in the conversion process. Unlike the steps, the divine–human encounter is the event or moment in the conversion process. The two axes in the model provide the supportive roles in the conversion process. The x axis indicates the social psychological dimension and the y axis indicates the religious dimension. These two axes provide the context for conversion, or an interface between the social and religious dimensions. These factors have constant interaction throughout the process and cannot be restricted to a single step. Transformation begins at the Spark and moves towards maturation independent of the steps.

The divine–human encounter in conversion is the turning point that occurs in the mystical states of consciousness. Converts are not initially ready to follow Christianity, but when an encounter with the divine occurs, the divine is identified with Jesus and converts gain a certainty of experiencing the truth and claim a special knowledge of God based on this personal experience. The experiential evidence is forceful in converts' articulation that the divine–human encounter is personal and unparalleled to any other experience that comes with the knowledge of God. This knowledge gained is not a rational understanding of religious truths. This knowledge is possible only through direct experience of God, which cannot be imparted or articulated in verifiable philosophical propositions. This knowledge is given to converts at the divine–human encounter despite their antagonism against Christianity. Similar to Paul's conversion, converts from different religious backgrounds find their religious belief is replaced with a belief in Jesus. I find a suspension of volition in the moment, and when one returns to normal waking consciousness the previously held religious belief is discarded with a strong conviction that the newfound knowledge of God is real and true. Some converts might agitate for some time over leaving their previously held religious belief; however, there is a sense of excitement that God came to meet them. So the previously held religious beliefs eventually are discarded to embrace the new knowledge of God because the new knowledge is gained through direct revelation of God.

At the divine–human encounter, an informal conversation takes place between the divine and the convert. In this encounter, converts find unconditional love and acceptance from the divine, who is invisible, but in every other count converts begin to relate to the divine as a close companion as if one were relating to a close friend in a social relationship. The intimate relationship with the divine is a vital factor that makes converts hold on to their newfound faith.

When converts meet God in the divine–human encounter, they are terribly struck by the consciousness of sin. Suddenly, converts gain a new sense of sin in the presence of the divine. The sins they become convicted of are not usually terrible sins like adultery or murder, but even small habits, like watching movies or being proud, etc., are viewed as great sins. The moment converts realize their sins, they have no hesitation to confess them and at once gain a sense of being forgiven by the divine. The divine–human encounter creates a sense of sin and a sense of being forgiven simultaneously. Though converts feel miserable about their sins during the encounter, when the encounter is over they are filled not with remorse but long-lasting joy, peace, and happiness.

The fruit of religious conversion is the integrated well-being of a person. The effects of religious conversion encompass all aspects of the convert's life. It effects a change in the spiritual, psychological, behavioral, physical, social, and economical dimensions of the convert's life. Religious conversion cannot be restricted only to the religious or spiritual dimension, because most often it begins at the psychological level with a crunch as the context and permeates all dimensions of life. The effect is that converts experience a sense of well-being not only in the spiritual dimension, but in other dimensions too. Therefore, conversion results in integrated well-being that includes one or several aspects of the person. Any religious conversion that results in integrated well-being of a person can be termed a genuine conversion. The individual's or community's right to convert is the right to have access to integrated well-being. Denying the religious or spiritual dimension in the conversion process, or restricting conversion only to the religious or spiritual dimension, is erroneous. A phenomenological understanding of religious conversion brings us to this understanding of religious conversion.

Transformative Religious Experience is the outcome of my passion for the study of religious experience, on the one hand, and my concern for the perennial issue of religious conversion in India that bedevils the Indian church, on the other hand, which kindled my interest to explore

this phenomenon over a decade ago. The seminal research for this book is my doctoral study of religious conversion at the University of Madras in Chennai, India. My continued interaction with the literature on religious conversion, religious experience, and spirituality from the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, theology, and missiology resulted in this volume.

This book deals with individual conversion experiences to Christianity in India. The converts are from many different walks of life. They come from different caste groups, from Dalits to Brahmins and tribal communities. In education they range from school dropouts to doctorates. Their economical status varies from poor laborer to rich businessperson. They converted from many different religious traditions—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and tribal religions—to follow Jesus, but not necessarily with the intent to adopt Christianity as their religion.

I have designed the book to let you hear the voices of converts themselves about their conversion experiences. Each chapter will carry conversion narratives, mostly in converts' own words, followed by my reflection in light of literature pertaining to the theme of the chapter. Some conversion narratives could fit under more than one theme and I have used my discretion to place them under a particular theme. I have also split some narratives to fit into the themes of more than one chapter. However, as far as possible, I have given the complete narratives in order to enable you to understand the life story of each convert and the effects of conversion in his or her daily life. Some interviews were conducted in English and others were in Tamil. They lasted for one to two hours. Verbal communication differs from written form. The interviews in English have the idiom of Indian English. The extracts are not the verbatim of the interviews, however, I have not attempted to polish the language to make it very formal. Whether in Tamil or in English, I have taken care to retain the sense of the narrator while translating them and making them readable. I have tried to preserve the tone, hesitation, emotion, and struggle in articulation. The names are changed and identifiable information is either omitted or changed to protect their identities. Original names are retained in the conversion narratives that have been taken from the public domain. I have consciously reduced disciplinary jargon and references to scholarly literature so as to make the text approachable to both specialists and the general public.

Chapter 1 deals with experience of visions that led to conversion. It begins with a story of Sania, a businessperson from a Muslim family.

She had a vision of Jesus during her college days. Being a devout Muslim, she wondered why Jesus appeared to her and was troubled by the vision. Sekar, a Hindu, had a vision of Jesus and was liberated instantly from his addiction to alcohol. The story of Selvi revolves around a vision of the crucifixion she saw as a teenager. All three of them never did anything to seek Christianity, but were faithful followers of their prior religions. These visions were given to them and they received them gladly.

Chapter 2 presents the dreams of three women in extreme anxiety owing to family situations. Everything changed in their lives after the dream. Komala hails from a Brahmin family, but was disenchanted with her religion and could not find peace, so she prayed and asked to know who the real God is. She had a dream that same night in which she received an answer to her question. The next story is about Vinodha, who suffered at the hands of her husband, who neither understood nor loved her. She was going through intense anxiety due to the situation in her family. She had a dream in which the divine called her “Daughter.” Thereafter she felt that she has someone who loves her, and she began a lasting relationship with the divine. Lastly, I present the dream of Sarala, who lost her husband and had a dream of Jesus that connected her to the divine. She found this new relationship offering strength to face the harsh reality of her life. These women became connected to the divine through their dreams and have cultivated an intimate relationship with the divine ever since.

Chapter 3 focuses on experiences in which converts claim that God spoke to them while reading the Bible or listening to a sermon. These kinds of divine communication are not auditory, but consist in a sudden realization or a feeling that someone spoke to them from within, directly addressing their crises or needs. I first present the story of Inban, an assistant professor in a technical university. He was a faithful follower of his religion of birth, Hinduism, but when he attended a Bible study he experienced that someone within him spoke to him about his private life. Secondly, Rekha, a college student, experienced the divine love by hearing a sermon, and she narrates her faith journey in which she had to walk out of her house because of her conversion. This is followed by the narratives of a husband and wife who are from a Brahmin family. The husband, while reading the Bible, heard someone within him tell him to be baptized. His wife, Praveena, had a thought repeatedly flashing in her mind that her gods were not real while she was chanting their names. These narratives contain descriptions of converts’ struggles and the resolution that led to a sense of peace and joy from the communication they received from God.

Chapter 4 presents the stories of converts who experienced dramatic relief from their troubled situations. They claim that these deliverances were miracles and they attribute the cause for such changes to God, which led them to believe in Jesus. This chapter begins with the story of an actor being saved from drowning in a sea, which is followed by the story of a woman who escaped death after her attempt to commit suicide. Then I present two conversion narratives of businessmen, which involve miraculous healing and miraculous resolution of a serious crisis in the family. In these narratives we see that converts test the workability of the new religious option before accepting it. Converts perceive such divine interventions as proofs for them to believe in Jesus.

Chapter 5 deals with experiences of prayer. It opens with excerpts from interviews of converts who had prayed to a generic God, without using a name or religious symbol, as they were not sure who the true God is. To their surprise, they claim that their prayers were answered by Jesus, which convinced them to believe in Jesus as the true God. Jemmu Bai, a tribal man, prayed to God asking him to heal him and reveal who the real God is. He had a vision that led to his conversion. This is followed by the stories of Nathan, a chartered accountant, and Balan, an engineer, who both prayed to God without using any name. This chapter also carries other stories of answered prayer by Jesus and some that were not answered in a manner converts expected. Despite this, they found that Jesus gave them peace and the ability to face difficult situations in life. Such experiences convinced them to believe in Jesus.

Chapter 6 explores mild experiences, those that are without any sensory or dramatic elements. Such experiences include being struck with a consciousness of sin, a sense of personalizing the message of the gospel, and the feeling of the presence of God. Though these experiences are considered mild, the divine-human encounter in them is clearly significant. Converts claim that believing in Jesus is like falling in love with someone and cannot be explained. The story of Karan presented here is a typical conversion story in which he struggled with his sinful life and found peace and joy in surrendering to Jesus. This is followed by the narrative of a Hindu teenage priest who found his deep thirst to experience the Supreme God met with finding Jesus. The stories of Vinitha and Vinay show how they experienced the presence of God.

Chapter 7 analyzes the mystical turning point, that is, the divine-human encounter. This is the religious experience or the event in the conversion process. The changeover from one faith to another occurs at

this point. This chapter examines the narratives of conversion experience and traces the point that triggers personal transformation. I argue here that conversion is an act of God, not simply a rational choice, because the turning point occurs in the mystical states of mind while normal waking consciousness is suspended. A rational choice is made only after the religious experience. The conversion of Ganga is very simple. When she got up from her sleep one morning she felt that Jesus is the true God. Nithya, a medical student, describes her conversion experience as similar to falling in love. Besides these narratives, I draw examples from other chapters to show how the divine-human encounter occurs in the mystical states of consciousness. The mystical turning point has the following features: *revelatory, conversational, noetic, ineffable, transient, passive, and intimate*.

Chapter 8 traces the transforming effects of conversion. This chapter shows that the conversion experience has great impact on various aspects of converts' lives: spiritual, psychological, behavioral, physical, social, and economic. To illustrate the transforming effects of conversion in various dimensions, I pick up particular aspects from the narratives presented in other chapters. This chapter demonstrates that the fruit of conversion is the integrated well-being of converts.

In Chapter 9, converts narrate the torments they have gone through because of their conversion. This chapter highlights the hostilities associated with conversion in India. These narratives will enable you to grasp the intensity of persecution from family and friends that converts faced because of their conversion to Christianity. Here, I continue the story of Sania from chapter 1. She had to flee her home because of her conversion and moved to twenty-six different places to evade her father's pursuit. I then pick up the story of Mohan, the teenage priest presented in chapter 6. He faced a life-threatening situation, humiliation, and torture at the hands of his friends and family. The stories of Janaki and Kushbu in this chapter will show how difficult it is for women to practice their newfound faith. For thirty years Janaki was not allowed by her husband to practice her Christian faith publicly, however, eventually he became a Christian. This chapter also discusses how converts handled such situations by drawing strength from God through prayer and reading the Bible. Here I also present the role of agents and the religious community in the conversion process, especially during persecution.

Chapter 10 presents the Step Model of transformative religious experience. This chapter elaborates on the steps involved in the conversion process. Though it is impossible to demarcate the precise beginning and

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end of each step, the flexibility of the Step Model can accommodate different aspects of this complex process. Unlike other models of conversion, the Step Model emphasizes the religious experience in conversion while incorporating the role of religious practices like prayer and reading the Bible in the conversion process. This chapter demonstrates that conversion is both a process and an event.

The goal of this book is to enable readers hear the voice of converts to Christianity in India that the divine–human encounter—the experience of Jesus—sparks off personal transformation, for which many have had to pay a heavy price owing to persecution. Furthermore, converts testify that they have been sustained their newfound faith through an intimate relationship with the divine, practiced through prayer and reading the Bible.

As you hear converts speak in the following pages, I am confident that you will be inspired, enriched, and challenged.

1 Visions

I have never seen the slightest scientific proof of the religious ideas of heaven and hell, of future life for individuals, or of a personal God.

—THOMAS A. EDISON (N.D., P. 8)

If . . . personal experience cannot serve as evidence for religious truth, then we have every reason to doubt the veridicality of orgasms.

—GWEN GRIFFITH-DICKSON (2000, P. 135)

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES INVOLVING A vision have visual, auditory, and automatic elements that involve the sensory organs. In automatism, one does something apart from conscious thought. While having a vision, the convert is passive, however, some sensory organs are active during the vision and the convert returns to waking consciousness after the experience. Though prior knowledge is a tool to interpret the vision, prior religious belief is redundant. In conversions to Christianity, converts identify the divine with Jesus in their vision. Converts' prejudices against or enmity toward Christianity disappear at this vision of Jesus. Fervor and pride in their religion of birth also vanish at the religious experience, and then they follow Jesus without hesitation. I present three visions in this chapter. The converts are ordinary people who did nothing to induce their religious experience, but still they had a vision of Jesus.

I first present the conversion narrative of Sania, a wealthy businessperson from a Muslim family. Sania had a vision of Jesus at the age of eighteen when she was studying engineering. She had to flee her home and move from one city to another for about ten years to evade her father's pursuit owing to her conversion to Christianity. I tried to contact her through various sources to have her as part of my study but failed. She never responded to my communication as she was reluctant to give an interview to a stranger. Finally, through a common friend I was able to get her to agree to meet with me. I introduced myself to her as a cross-cultural missionary working in North India, though I hail from South India and was then doing research on conversion. Once she was convinced that I was not simply an academic, but also one who serves the Lord, she was willing to share her life story. After this introduction and clarification about me, I was able to establish a good rapport with her and asked her to narrate her conversion story.



Sania: Actually, I am from . . . a Muslim family. From a very young age, we were taught Quran . . . My father is well-known in the business circle in the city. He treated me like his son [he has only two daughters] for educating me with a modern worldview. I grew up with a strong belief in my religion; however, we practiced tolerance towards other religions. I was good at my studies. I had to go to another city . . . for my engineering studies. That was the first time I left my home and stayed in a hostel.

My conversion happened dramatically. I never went to a church or read the Bible then. I never even had a Christian friend—no, I had only one Christian friend, but she never told me anything about Christ. She herself did not know anything about Christianity. I never had any idea about Christianity. All I knew about Christianity was that there was a religion called Christianity and Jesus was their God. My understanding of Christianity was based on whatever I had seen—mass or church—in the movies. My understanding of Christianity was very limited.

During the second year of my engineering studies, suddenly I was going through some kind of depression. I felt that I should be alone. I did not feel like talking to anybody. Otherwise, I was very active and also active socially.

This happened during Ramadan. We women continue the fast if we cannot complete it during the month of Ramadan. [When women have their periods, they carry over the fast.] Women can complete the fast later. So my mother told me, “Why don’t you fast and pray? You can get peace of mind.” They felt I should consult a psychiatrist. Because I was having exams I could not go. I asked the warden for a corner room where I could be alone and prepare for my exams. She gave me a room in the basement where no one else stayed. So literally I used to go to classes and come back and stay in the room and do my studies.

I forgot the exact date, but it was sometime in 1993. It was the coldest season. In the afternoon I left the window open. Sunlight was coming in. My table was in front of the window, and I was writing an assignment. I locked the door from inside. As I was writing, suddenly I heard a voice calling me by name and saying, “Pray.” I felt as if someone were standing behind me. I heard a man’s voice . . . I just turned back only to see none. The door was locked. I felt much wearied. I really felt as if I were hallucinating or going mad. Already the talk of consulting a psychiatrist was considered by my parents . . . As I started reading, again . . . the same voice was saying, “Pray.” This time it kept repeating, “Pray, pray, pray” . . . I really thought, “I am gone mad.” I thought I was really becoming mad . . . I really felt something was wrong with me. I closed the book as I could not concentrate; just sat there. I looked at my watch, and it was 1:30 p.m. The Muslim prayer time had passed in the afternoon. Really, I did not know how to pray; we were taught to pray only at that time. I was thinking, “How will I pray now?”

So I just closed my eyes, sitting on my chair. I said within my heart—I remember very well, I said, “I do not know who this is asking me to pray. If there is a God, then I want to see that God. I have done all that my parents have told me to do. But I have never felt or seen you.” I prayed as if it were a routine. “If I am not mad, then I need to see who is calling me.” I was saying this in my heart. I just closed my eyes.

I was eighteen then. For the first time in my life, never had I seen such a thing. I saw with my eyes closed; I saw the whole room and everything. Near my table, I saw one person was standing—a huge, tall person—but I could not see the face. His face was bright, very bright . . . mmm, very bright. The garment itself was very bright. I do not know what he was wearing; it was like a *kurtha* [a long top

men wear in India], a very bright thing. I knew it was a person, but I could not see the face. I knew *instantly* that it was Jesus. Now he did not say, “I am Jesus”—nothing! I knew in my heart immediately that it was Jesus. I did not have any doubt. I never had any doubt. I did not even question myself. I cannot explain . . . that feeling! I just knew it was Jesus.

The next moment, I was on my knees. I just fell down . . . I just fell, on my own; I fell down. I was sobbing and crying and crying and crying and crying because I felt very dirty. The brightness—whatever the bright thing was, the brightness around me . . . I looked at myself in my vision. I was seeing; I was looking at myself. I was fully black and full of dirt. The light gave such feeling about me. I felt I was so poor inside of me. Since I come from a rich family, I never lacked anything. I never had such kind of feeling. But that day I felt I was very poor. I felt I had too much of pride. I never knew that I had all these things. But I was crying and crying, sobbing and sobbing on my knees. I remember saying, “I do not know who you are, but Jesus, I need you. I know I need you in my life because I am very poor—I cannot handle it. I am very poor on my own. I cannot do anything. I need you.” I did not realize at the time that I was born again. I was crying and then the vision disappeared.



Sania was a righteous person and never felt that she was sinful before her vision. She never struggled to overcome sin, but only the vision made her feel that she was sinful, dirty, and poor. It appears that the vision brought in her a sense of sin and created a need to depend on the divine. A crisis was created and a resolution offered at the religious experience. She continued her narration:



Sania: When I opened my eyes, it was about 2:15 or 2:45 p.m. It lasted for a long period. Then a fear gripped me; I felt very scared. I felt, “What has gone wrong with me? Why was I crying like this?” I felt like running out of my room. I was terrified and opened the door and ran out. Then I was very disturbed. I did not know what to do. Who do I talk to? I cannot tell anyone. I was thinking, “Where to go? What to do?” Then came to my mind a Christian girl who was in another branch of study and was in the same hostel. But I never talked to her

in the past. She was very different. She never used to hang around with others. But her name came to my mind.

I went to her room and woke her up. She was napping—it was in the afternoon. I woke her up. I had never spoken to her earlier. I told her what I said [in response to the voice asking me to pray]: “If there is a God, I need to see you.” Then I saw Jesus. I questioned her, “Why did I see Jesus? Because I am not a Christian! I am a Muslim! Why did I see him?” I think my eyes were red; I was quite . . . you know. She might have been scared. She did not know what to do. She had a Bible with her and gave me the Bible and said, “I do not know!” She opened to the Book of John and put a slip of paper there and said, “You read this.” She also said, “If you have seen Jesus, he would speak to you.” [Laughs.] I think she was taken aback. She did not know what to do!

I took the book and went to my room. I started reading. That day I read and read and read. I read the Bible from John to Revelation, then from Genesis. I was reading till 3:00 in the morning. I kept on reading and reading, just like that. I never read a book like that; it was very alive, as if the words were popping out of the pages and speaking to me. As I was reading, I was crying at that time. The words were alive. I never read any book in my life like that, a different kind of a book. So I kept reading. Next morning I went back to her . . . No, it was not the next day; I kept reading the Bible; after two days . . . I do not remember; I was reading the Bible for a few days.

During these days, there was a battle in my mind. Throughout my life, I have been a science person and quite logical. I was taught that Islam was true. I was thinking of all that I believed. I really looked up to my father and what he taught me. I had a feeling that he could never be wrong. How could what I believed all these days become all false suddenly? In a fraction of a second, it goes off. I was not sure what I was doing all the time. How come it was wrong all of a sudden? All of a sudden, I found out that all I believed was wrong. I questioned, “If Jesus is the true God, if all religions are same, if all roads lead to one God, why did not I see Allah or Shiva or someone else when I prayed?” All kinds of questions were coming up in my mind; it was like a battle. After some time, I could not deal with it by myself. Because I knew I needed to speak to somebody. I was going deeper and deeper and it was troubling me very badly. I went back to this girl and asked her to tell me more about Jesus.

She then took me to one church and that was the first church I went to . . . No, it was not a church, it was an African Students' Fellowship. I never had gone to any church, even to a Catholic church that is so silent. That was my first visit. I did not understand a thing. They were jumping and dancing. [Laughs.] I was wondering, "Why are they doing like this?" For me, worship is a very somber and solemn kind of thing and very personal—not like this. But I knew one thing . . . from their faces: it was real; they were not faking. Then the preacher, a Nigerian, started speaking. He was very loud. He was speaking in English, but I did not understand anything. I should have understood, but I did not understand. At the end he said, "All close your eyes." But I did not close my eyes, and then he loudly said, "All eyes must be closed." I was looking at him, and he came near me and loudly said, "Close your eyes." Then I got scared and closed my eyes. After this, I did not realize when people sat down [after the prayer]; my friend had to pull me down to make me sit. That was my first experience in a church. After the meeting, someone asked me, "Are you born again?" I did not know what it was and I said, "I was born in [a state in India]." Absolutely, I had no idea! I slowly understood as I read, going to church, and understood the Word of God.



Later in the interview I probed her more on the person she saw in the vision. Since she was a faithful Muslim, how come she did not see anything related to her religion of birth? So I asked her, "In your vision, you couldn't see the face, but you were convinced that it was Jesus. Did you ever reflect on it later whether the person might be someone else?" She was emphatic in her reply:



Sania: *Never* [emphatically]. I cannot . . . I cannot explain how. I just knew. It is not—it is *instant*. I looked at him, Jesus, *instantly*. How to explain? [Whispers and pauses for a moment.] I never had a doubt, then or even later. It is my own . . . it is like my own personal thing. I feel when a human meets God, he or she knows his or her God. You know, because I never had any doubt. You have asked a very nice question. Because I never ever doubted; I never doubted that it could be someone else. *From that day till today I never doubted.*

Q: Did not you think of your religious symbols . . . then?

Sania: At that moment I did not think about my religion. Later on when I went to meet the girl, I asked her, “Why did I see Jesus?” I had this question, “Why didn’t I see Allah?” But I was sure that it was Jesus and the assurance was one hundred percent. I cannot explain. I never doubted it. I just knew it was Jesus.

For one week, since the vision, there was a war in my head. Because I cannot doubt the fact; I knew it. Never before I had something like that for sure. You know I was so sure [that it was Jesus]. But the question was, “Why Jesus?” That was the question—“Why Jesus?” That meant all that I believed was wrong. All that I believed was wrong? It shook the foundation and was a very shaking thing. I went through a struggle. But the doubt that it could be someone else never ever occurred to me.

Q: As a Muslim, what was your religious life like?

Sania: I was not deeply religious, but whatever I was supposed to do—reading [Quran], *namaz*—not five times a day, whenever I got time, at least once a day or twice a day—I did them. We were taught to read the Quran from a very young age. It is in Arabic, so I learned Arabic when I was three years. I used to read Quran very regularly. We used to have prayer meetings at home. My father comes from an Imam family and is very religious. He cultivated those habits in us. I really believed my religion was true; I believed this. Not because I had my own conviction, but because my dad told me. He did say that Islam was the truth, the only truth, and I really believed; I really believed. I did everything—fasting, prayer, and how a normal Muslim would do that—by fully believing Islam was the truth.

Q: How do you differentiate your newfound faith with the former?

Sania: When I found Jesus, I have my own way of praying. I close my eyes and talk to him—just talking. In the Islamic way of praying, I followed a set of rules, like, say this and bend down, etc. We just do the entire ritual, just that. No one talks to God, and there is no relationship [with God]. But here, I can hear Jesus speaking to me. That is the biggest difference. I speak to him; I hear him speak back. I speak to him; I hear him speak back. Earlier, I never heard anyone speaking to me. Here, I hear him speak back. Over the years, I learned to differentiate

the voices and am still learning. Now I learned to differentiate all other voices [from the voice of Jesus]. That is the major difference.



If you have noticed, we find a tone of disappointment in Sania's words that she did not see something related to her religion in her vision. She says there was a *war* in her mind, but at the same time she was so certain that the person in the vision was Jesus. The conflict between allegiance to her religion and the vision is very obvious in her narration; she struggled to come out of it. But never wanted to give up the person she saw in the vision.

She also described the transformation in her life and the subsequent religious experiences she had that enabled her to increase her knowledge of Christianity.



Sania: At eighteen, all of a sudden . . . all of a sudden I felt I was enlightened. I never knew that I had pride or I never knew that I was self-righteous. I saw my heart changed. In the sense, I cannot say that I did wrong things like alcohol or all those bad things . . . On the whole, I realized that there is something more to life. How would I say? It's like a vacuum; you feel the vacuum. Earlier, I was thinking, "Okay if I study and become highly educated and become like my father"—my father was my role model and I wanted to become more than he—"then I will achieve some things." [Laughs.] I had that kind of idea [about life]—always wanting something. But since the moment I saw the vision of Jesus, suddenly everything was changed.

Since then, Jesus was speaking to me directly because I did not know the Bible. So every time I used to pray in my own style—just go into my room and close my eyes and talk, as I did that day. I simply talked. I would see a vision through which he would show me various things. My friend introduced me to a Pentecostal church. I would call up the pastor and tell him a vision. He used to come and explain to me from the Bible exactly what I had seen in my vision. So I asked him, "Why does it happen to me?" The pastor would say that he himself did not know! The basic thing is that God loves me and died for me, you have to be like a child to enter heaven . . . and he showed me all those things.

Q: Any examples?

Sania: For example, you have to be like a child. One day as I was closing my eyes and talking to him [Jesus], you know, I fell in love with him and was always talking to him. I used to close my eyes and talk to him. I say everything to him. Closing my eyes only, I could talk to him. That is my pattern. [Laughs.] I do this as if I cannot talk to him otherwise. I could talk to him only if I close my eyes, in my room alone with no one around. I just—I do not know what to call this—a prayer or what . . . whatever it is.

I saw another vision of the same person whom I saw on that day. This time he was holding a small girl by hand and was showing as he was going up on a mountain, kind of nice valleys, rivers, and animals, those kinds of things. He was showing as if they were hers but not without him. He was holding her hand and showing her. I felt that the little girl was I. So I asked the pastor, “Why did I see myself as a little girl? I am a big girl now. Why as a very small girl? It was a small baby.” The pastor explained to me from the Bible, “Unless you become like a little child you cannot enter the kingdom of God. God is showing you this. For him, you are a little kid. You are a little kid to him. He is showing you all that he has for you and given you.” I was experiencing those kinds of things. But I would say God’s love for me is more than anything.

After a month, one night I had a dream. I saw myself under the water and was coming out in the dream. Something like a rubber stamp coming and hitting me here [showing her forehead]. I called up the pastor, and he explained me about baptism. Then I asked him to baptize me. But he said, “No, no, wait. You are going too fast. Take time. No, no, you wait. You think about it.” He was telling me about baptism and its meaning. After a week—no, after three or four days—I had the same dream again. I knew in my heart, this time I had to do it. By then I knew what baptism was. I took my friend and some clothes to change, and went to the pastor. I told him, “You have to baptize me.” He said, “[This time] I have to do this!” Only his wife and my friend were there. It was a nice experience. Jesus was directly talking to me and actually I needed that.

I experienced transformation. The way I started looking at my life, in terms of inner meaning of life, brought about a huge difference in me. Earlier I was not like that. The biggest transformation is that I have discovered meaning in life, and I got a new heart.



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I drew her attention to the depression she had before the religious experience. I asked her whether she was able to come out of her depression after the vision.



Sania: Again . . . for me, I see it as a miracle because the depression simply went away. What happened on that day was, when I was sobbing, I felt very warm within me. I did not feel . . . I did not feel somebody was pointing a finger at me. I was crying and was feeling very dirty. I did not feel . . . did not feel someone telling me . . . I did not feel the person in the vision was telling me, “You are dirty.” I cannot express it. All the while I was crying, I felt physically warmth around me. It was a different kind of love; I never felt something like that.



It appeared that her depression was in order to have the vision. In our conversation she was pointing out that she used to be socially very active, but all of a sudden she felt that she was depressed and wanted to be alone and got her room changed in the hostel where she could be on her own. After the vision, she never went into depression, despite the ordeal she went through for more than ten years owing to her conversion to Christianity.

To bring out what makes people change from one religion to another, I almost always asked them what caused them to hold on to their new-found faith and to describe God based on their experience.



Q: What is the most significant thing that holds you to Jesus?

Sania: [Silence.] Mmm . . . if I pinpoint, for example, I cannot even think of a life without him now. Why could I not think of a life without him? The most significant thing is to be alive inside; I need Jesus to be alive within me. I am not saying physically dead. What happened was I became alive on that day when I saw him. The feeling—something that is not tangible—I cannot explain to you. The most significant thing is I am alive; my inside is alive. That is the one thing that keeps me in Jesus.

Q: How do you describe God based on your experience?

Sania: Mmm . . . to me, for me, the first thing, if you ask me, based on my life and based on what I have discovered: God is real. That is the first thing. Earlier I never realized whether God is real or man-made. But now I know that he is real. Second, he loves his creation. For me, God is real; he is my Father and loves me unconditionally. His love is not going to change or grow more or grow less. I cannot do something that would make his love grow more or do something that would make his love grow less. I understood this great truth. My religion was based on deeds—God loves you more if you do something good or he loves you less if you do not do something good. With Jesus, there is nothing that I could do to make him love me more or less. This is something different.



That was Sania's dramatic story of conversion, and I reserve the rest of her story to discuss later in chapter 9, on "Hostilities." We will move on to the next vision.

Sekar, a businessman, was struggling with his addiction to alcohol. He had tried his religion to get deliverance from his addiction, but there was no result. Sekar has a furniture showroom in Chennai. I met him at his showroom and he was busy entertaining the customers. I requested an appointment to interview him, but he refused and was reluctant to meet me elsewhere to discuss his vision. But he opened the drawer in his table and pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to me. It was a handwritten photocopy of his testimony that he kept readily available for distribution to his customers. I quote a section from his testimony here:



Sekar: I was an alcoholic for many years and tried my best to leave the habit, but I could not. I visited various temples like [a famous temple in South India and other temples in Tamil Nadu], praying for deliverance from the addiction. But there was no change. I drank all the more even after returning from [a famous temple], after offering much prayer that I should leave this habit. On August 26, 2000, I drank so much of alcohol and went home at 11:00 p.m.

While I was in deep sleep, I felt someone patted me at the back and called me by name, "Sekar! Sekar! Wake up, wake up." He took hold of my hand and woke me up and said, "You come with me. From today, I will lead you on a good path." He led me for about two

hundred feet from my bedroom to outside on the street. I was left at the gate outside my house. A bright light from the sky fell on me. I shouted, “Jesus save me!” and became conscious. I wondered, “Why am I here in the middle of the night?” I entered my house and saw both the doors were left open. I looked at the clock and the time was 3:00 in the morning. Since then, I could feel the bright light always appear before my eyes. Since then, the name Jesus . . . Jesus comes often in my mind. Since August 27, 2000, I do not know how the habits of idol worship and desire for alcohol left me! This happened by the glory of the Lord Jesus.



Sekar was struggling with sin before he had the vision. He tried his religion of birth to liberate him from his addiction to alcohol but was not successful. However, he neither prayed to Jesus nor considered Christianity to resolve the crisis. Nevertheless, the vision of Jesus instantly transformed him and liberated him from his addiction to alcohol.

Let me introduce you to Selvi, a businessperson from a Hindu family. She had a vision of the crucifixion during her school days. Though she studied in a Christian school, she was against Christianity. But after the vision, she feels that she is touched by the love of Jesus.



Selvi: I am from a Hindu family. I studied in a Christian institution. I was far from the Lord. Towards the end of my school days, I had a vision of Jesus while I was on my bed. I saw the Lord face to face in my vision. I saw Jesus hanging on the cross in my vision. The vision was very vivid and lasted for about three hours. At that time, all my sins that I had committed from my childhood days were appearing before me. Earlier, I had felt some kind of emptiness within me. But the day Jesus met me and forgave my sins, the first thing happened to me was his love filled my heart. His loving eyes had filled my heart. Since the moment I had seen the Lord—for three hours—my life was changed totally. I left my former pattern of worship and was convinced that the Lord Jesus Christ is the true God. I committed my life totally to God.

Q: Did you ever pray to Jesus earlier?

Selvi: No, I never prayed to Jesus. I studied in a Catholic school, so I liked Mother Mary. But later I studied in another school . . . that was a Protestant school. Many elders used to come to tell about Jesus. I had lot of Brahmin [the priestly caste in Hinduism] friends, and we used to sit at the back, as it was compulsory. We made fun of those who told about Jesus and criticized them very badly. The lives of many Christians were stumbling blocks to me. They talked so much, but they didn't show it in their life. I did not like the way they lived their lives. Earlier I used to like Mother Mary very much, but after coming to this school, I started hating Christianity. I was against Christianity.

In this situation, the Lord himself came in search of me. When I was an enemy to him, when I was speaking against him, and doing things against him, Jesus came in search of me. I never thought about Jesus and never prayed to him, nor did I call on him. I had nothing to do with him. I had seen some movies in which Jesus was carrying a cross, like *Annai Velankanni* [a Tamil movie based on a Catholic shrine in Tamil Nadu] and Bible-related films. But those days I never prayed to Jesus. The Lord himself came in search of me and showed me the crucifixion. But I could recognize him as the Lord Jesus Christ.


The Lord told me, "Daughter, you follow only me." The Lord spoke to me on that day. That day, all my sins from my childhood days appeared to me like a movie. I could see the cross as well as all my sins. Sins do not mean big sins, but small things like arguing with my parents, disobeying them, and things that grieved Jesus, etc. I was crying and praying. My tears wet my pillow. I did not know how to pray. But I felt that somebody was praying for me, from within myself. The whole of my pillow was wet with my tears. The vision lasted from 2:00 a.m. until 5:00 a.m., and it disappeared when the clock rang at 5:00 a.m. I was filled with great joy in my heart. All those days I was carrying a burden in my heart, but on that day there was a great joy in my heart. At that moment only I realized that Jesus is the true God. Since that day, God gave me the grace to worship him alone.

Q: Did you face any crisis prior to this?


Selvi: I did not face any crisis. But during my childhood days I felt that there was some kind of emptiness within me. I used to long for friends' love and was longing for worldly love. Those days, I did not realize that all those things were vain. I started realizing that my

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friends' love was not complete and not true. I did not have any problems or tragedy or anything. One thing I know: Jesus's love filled my heart. He is the God who gave his life for me. He gave his life for me. He is the God who loves me greatly despite my sins and limitations. Even today his deep love for me is a great surprise to me. He is the loving God who gave his life for me. His unlimited love is incomprehensible. I was drawn to him only because of his love.




Though Selvi was against Christianity, the vision of crucifixion changed her enmity against Christianity instantly. Selvi was not struggling with her sin as Sekar did. Only in the vision did she realize that she was sinful. So I asked her, "Did you consider those things that came as sins in your vision as sins earlier?"



Selvi: I realized my sins only on that day. I was crazy for movies. I sing nicely, so I pretend to study my subjects, but I would be singing movie songs. I did other things like disobeying parents, arguing with them, and fighting with my brothers and sisters. I did not consider these things sins then. Only on that day, when the Lord convicted me, I realized they were serious sins. I felt as if they were like big mountains and serious sins against God. Only on that day I realized; otherwise everyone does all these things. So I never felt they were sins. Only on that day the Lord convicted me of my sins.



I wanted to know the nature of the vision and her state of mind during and after the vision, so I asked her, "Were you conscious for the three hours?"



Selvi: I was very much conscious. It was not a dream. I am sure it was not a dream. Though I was on my bed, but I am sure that it was not a dream. It was not a dream, but I saw him face to face. I saw a vision and was surprised! I remember that our house was small. My parents were also sleeping in the same room. Still it was a big surprise for me!

I could not understand. I was on my bed—how I saw the Lord? But . . . I saw him face to face. The crucifixion scene was still in front of my eyes. I could not see his face, but I saw his suffering on the cross. The crucifixion is still fresh in my memory. I am sure that it was not a dream because I was fully conscious.

Q: What was your feeling immediately after the vision?

Selvi: I felt great happiness! I was filled with great and incomprehensible joy! I told my parents that day, but they did not take it very seriously, thinking that I was childish. I told my friends. I told my Brahmin friend whose father was a temple *pujari* [priest]. She was the same girl who was with me in making fun of people who preached Jesus. Later, she also accepted Jesus and is now a high official in the government.

Q: How was the whole day for you after the vision?

Selvi: I did not realize then that it was going to be a big turning point in my life. I did not realize that my life was going to change upside down because of this! But something significant happened. I thought I had known the true God. I never expected any great changes on that day. I was filled with great happiness and incomprehensible joy. I do not know how to express. I received great happiness and peace on that day. I was longing for love from my friends, but since then I never had anyone else in the first place. Christ's love filled my heart, neither the love of my husband nor my children—not even my parents' love.



We find a mixture of feelings here. In one sense, Selvi realized her sin and struck by the guilt of her sin. On the other, she was excited about the love of Jesus. She claimed that she was filled with incomprehensible joy. Our discussion moved on to the next phase of her conversion.



Q: After that how did you grow in the Lord?

Selvi: During the last days of schooling, they [teachers in the school] gave me the Bible. I was surprised the way the Lord guided me. Initially, when I started reading the Bible, my parents did not object. But when


I got completely changed, stopped worshipping Hindu gods, stopped going for movies, and stopped doing any of their practices, I began to face opposition at home. I faced problems at home. Especially, my mother opposed me. My father studied in a Christian institution, and he had a little faith in Christianity. So my mother blamed him that he had spoiled me. My father neither did anything to make me a Christian nor did he oppose me. We even had a Bible in our house. My parents were of the view that all religions are the same. But when I accepted Jesus Christ, only my mother was very much against me. She became very much agitated. No one else opposed me like my mother did.

My teachers and another Christian leader guided me nicely. My teacher only told me about the Holy Spirit. In one of the prayer meetings in a small group, I received the anointment of the Holy Spirit. It was a different kind of experience. I did not realize that experience would be a turning point! I was told that I need to take baptism. But I did not know what it was. I thought baptism was some kind of blessing from God that I needed to get. I went to a church for baptism, but the pastor told me that he would not give baptism for Hindu converts, saying that they need to grow more. When the pastor was not willing to baptize me, I felt all the more eager to receive it. I thought that this was something important, and I needed it. So I started praying that I should get it. However, on the day of baptism service, the pastor baptized me. Since then, I faced lots of problems at home. I faced many struggles because of Christ. Sometimes, I was beaten up and told that I should leave the house because of my faith. I used to cry and stand outside the house.

As soon as I joined college, I started a prayer cell. I faced opposition from the college authorities, as it was a Hindu college. I was publicly humiliated for my faith and was ridiculed that I would fail in my studies. My movements were closely observed by the authorities. The authorities confiscated all my spiritual books and my Bible. But one of my seniors gave me a Bible. I used to hide it inside a book and read. The Lord used to speak to me every moment. The Lord was using me to spread the gospel to others. At the end of the year, I could shine in my studies; the warden returned the Bible and other books to me.


Then I went to a Christian college where I thought that I would enjoy more freedom to grow in the Lord. But I was denied permission to go to church as my certificate showed me a Hindu. However,

I managed to go to church sometimes without the knowledge of the authorities. Jesus guided me graciously those days.



Later, Selvi married a Hindu, and her mother-in-law made her practice all the Hindu rituals. In a Hindu family, the daughter-in-law is expected to fulfill all the responsibilities with regard to the religious life of a family. Selvi did them all, as she was afraid of her mother-in-law. She was frustrated a lot, but never thought of giving up Jesus.

When they went through some problems in their business, she began to assert her right to practice Christianity. She started refusing to participate in the family rituals. Her husband slowly began to see her prayers being answered with regard to their business problems, and he also started reading the Bible. In the meantime, her mother-in-law suffered from cancer and asked Selvi to pray for her. After many years, Selvi could see a turnaround in her family believing in Jesus. I present our conversation on her understanding of God in light of her experience.




Q: How do you describe God in light of your spiritual experience?

Selvi: I cannot describe him in words. His love is incomprehensible. I praise God for his love. I worship him in tears. We cannot understand his love. His love protected me while I was facing all the troubles and sustained me. I am the worst sinner in the world, but he loves me so much. I am nothing, I am weak; still he loves me! He came to this world for me. He died for me! He gave his life for me. He shed his blood for me. His love filled my heart. God is love only. I have tasted his love in a deeper and deeper manner. I wondered why he still loves me!

Q: Who was instrumental in leading you to Christ?

Selvi: No one was instrumental in leading me to Christ. The Lord came in search of me. Earlier I had despised him, but the Lord came to me.



Selvi was emphatic in saying that no human agent was involved in leading her to Jesus. Though she acknowledged that her teachers and others played a role in guiding her since the vision, she claimed that Jesus

came in search of her. The vision of the crucifixion dramatically transformed her life.

In all three visions, we find the element of automatism. When Sania saw the person in the vision, immediately she knelt down and started crying. In Sekar's vision, he got up from his bed and walked all the way out of the house into the street. When Selvi saw the vision, she was crying and her pillow was wet with her tears. This is something similar to a hypnotized person who would obey the command of the hypnotizer; however, in such cases, when consciousness is regained they do not remember anything they did. But in religious experiences, people remember everything, and the experience has a profound impact in their lives. William James (1902/2004, p. 412) observed, "Beliefs are strengthened wherever automatisms corroborate them . . . Motor automatisms, though rarer, are, if possible, even more convincing than sensations. The subjects here actually feel themselves played upon by powers beyond their will. The evidence is dynamic; the God or spirit moves the very organs of their body." Converts to Christianity perceive Jesus as the cause of their behavior in their religious experience. However, their religious beliefs are not strengthened by automatism, as found by James, but replaced with a belief in Jesus. The dynamic evidence of automatism in conversion to Christianity makes a lasting impact in the lives of converts that results in a change of religious faith.

We also find auditory element in these visions. Sania, Selvi, and Sekar heard a voice speaking to them in their visions. Both Sania and Sekar heard their names called and were spoken to by the divine. In Selvi's vision she was addressed as "daughter." Selvi points out that her parents were also sleeping in the same small room; however, they never heard anything, nor did they see anything that Selvi saw. These features are similar to the vision of St. Paul in the New Testament. Richard Peace (1999, p. 83) analyzed St. Paul's vision and claimed, "The result of Paul's encounter with Jesus was the restructuring of his theological understanding." For converts to Christianity, it is not simply a restructuring of their theology, but a replacement of their religious belief. This replacement of religious belief is not due to rational exercise, but due to their sensory experience in their encounter with Jesus. Sensory experiences of Jesus are not unique only to converts. Luhrmann (2012, p. 216) finds similar experiences among evangelical Christians. She calls them *sensory overrides* and defines them as "moments when perception overrides the material stimulus." She observes that though sensory experiences have all the features of hallucinations,

they are not hallucinations. She asserts, “The moments did meet psychiatric criteria for hallucinations . . . Yet the pattern and quality of the experience was quite different from that in psychosis, and there was no associated pathology” (2012, p. 231). She claims that believers are trained by Vineyard Fellowship, and prayer training makes people have more such sensory overrides. She demonstrated her claim through her experiment with a group of Christian volunteers. However, it was not out of any training that converts to Christianity experienced sensory experiences of vision, hearing voices, the felt presence of Jesus, or touch. Prayer training cannot be the cause of sensory experiences of a religious nature, but it might enhance the frequency of such experiences. We cannot brush aside converts’ claims that the cause of their sensory experiences in conversion is Jesus because the religious experience was spontaneous.

In all the visions, converts either saw a bright light or brightness was otherwise evident. Many studies show the association of brightness or bright light with religious experience, much like Paul’s vision in which he saw a bright light that blinded him. Converts could not see the face of the one they saw, but identified him as Jesus. Selvi’s vision was a crucifixion, so we can understand that she was able to recognize that it was Jesus. Sania and Sekar never did anything to seek Jesus nor did anything Christian, but they were able to recognize the person in their vision as Jesus. They instantly recognized that it was Jesus without being told so or given something to indicate that was Jesus. This is something perplexing. Sania claimed that she could not see the face because it was so bright, but instantly she recognized that it was Jesus. I questioned Sania about how she could be certain that it was Jesus. She emphatically said that it was Jesus, and she was certain of what she saw in the vision. Sania even claimed that she saw the person in the vision with her “eyes closed.” She claimed that it was her “personal thing” that cannot be expressed in words. When Sekar came out to the street in his vision, he saw a bright light and immediately cried, “Jesus save me.” He did not elaborate how he, a devout Hindu, could identify the bright light with Jesus. However, they were conscious while having their religious experience. Sania believes that only the individual knows when he or she meets God and that cannot be described. This particular dimension indicates the revelatory nature of the divine–human encounter, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.

Despite converts not seeking a solution to their crisis from Christianity, they saw Jesus in their vision. Sania wanted to consult a psychiatrist for her depression. Sekar tried his religion of birth for deliverance from his

addiction to alcohol. Both never considered Christianity as an option to solve their crisis. They never had any association with Christianity; however, the vision of Jesus gave them the absolute certainty of knowing the truth, and they felt its positive effects immediately. The vision gave them relief from their crisis. Sania claimed that she never had any depression after her religious experience. Sekar felt that he never had any urge to take liquor ever since his experience.

While seeing the vision, converts felt that they were sinful before the divine. They had a sense of being sinful, dirty, poor, incomplete, and so on. Since then, they feel that they cannot think of a life without Jesus; they feel the need of him in their lives very strongly. They were captivated by the divine presence and love. For both Sania and Selvi, we find that their religious experience created a sense of sin that had never been there earlier. We also find that it was resolved then and there, and they felt they were accepted and forgiven at once. Religious experience creates a crisis of sin and resolves the same instantly.

A relationship with a human agent is not a prerequisite for initiating the conversion process. No agent was involved in these conversions. The converts claimed that God himself came in search of them. They felt privileged at having a vision. However, they went in search of someone who could help them to know more about Christianity only after they had their vision. In such cases, agents appeared only after the religious experience.

Visions make people zealous and passionate about sharing what they have experienced. Both Sania and Selvi claimed that they converted many of their friends within a year. Selvi married a Hindu. As a daughter-in-law, she had to fulfill all the responsibilities related to the religious life of her family, and her mother-in-law forced her to practice all Hindu rituals. Selvi did them all, as she was afraid of her mother-in-law. She was frustrated a lot, but never thought of giving up Jesus. Eventually, she was able to win over her husband and mother-in-law to Jesus.

Converts are certain of experiencing the *true God*. Their experiences gave converts the certainty of experiencing the true God, and their crises were solved. Sania, Selvi, and Sekar did nothing related to Christianity before they had a vision, but still they saw a vision of Jesus. However, all those who had a vision were certain of finding the truth or felt that the truth was revealed to them.

Studies show that such visions are not scarce. Alister Hardy (1979/1984, p. 33), based on his extensive research on religious experience in Britain, claimed, "There can be no doubt that such experiences are

more common than many people suppose.” Phillip Wiebe did a detailed study of Christic visions and made a similar claim. He (1997, pp. 212–13) observed, “The visions often occur quite spontaneously, rather than being generated by deliberate efforts to produce them through fasting, oxygen deprivation, focused meditation, or other similar techniques.” A vision of Jesus can occur to anyone, irrespective of their interest in Christianity. However, when it occurs they adopt Christianity despite their indifference or animosity to Christianity. In my study, some never expected such an experience, and never searched for the truth or ever raised any existential question, but still they saw a vision of Jesus. On the other hand, some were eagerly waiting for an answer to their existential questions and they also saw a vision of Jesus. No matter what was the context in which they had a vision, they all identified the person in the vision with Jesus, contrary to their religious beliefs and expectations. Some were anti-Christian and some were prejudiced against Christianity, however, after their religious experience all their enmity and prejudices against Christianity vanished. They moved from one extreme to other, similar to St. Paul, and were certain of experiencing the truth. We will move on to discuss conversion experiences associated with dreams in the next chapter.