CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The first part of the thesis has thrown light on Mizo traditional religion, their concept of God and its affinities with the Christian concept of God. The conceptual transformations that have taken place in their concept of God due to their conversion to Christianity have also been pointed out. The concept of Christian conversion too has been discussed. In this chapter, I wish to argue against the constant and repeated reference to traditional religion and culture as primitive.

Due to the personal, racial, ethnic and political egocentricity of writers on Mizo religion and culture Mizo religion has often been called 'primitive'. This incongruous use of the word originated from the notion that anything that does not conform to a certain cultural pattern accepted as the norm by the Western man is regarded automatically as primitive; which is, that which belongs to the category of those things which have somehow been left behind in the race of cultural sophistication. Primitive' in this connection means, categorically, 'backward', 'rude' or 'uncouth'.

127
A fact that is undeniable is that there is an element of ancient remaining in every culture. Whatever the stage of development, each culture has elements that are continued and elements that are discontinued. For example\(^ {172}\), even in a new culture (or in a medley of cultures) like that of America, there are unmistakably vestiges of the cultural backgrounds of the peoples who are now embraced by the common name of Americans. In the year 1969, Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, celebrated a very elaborate May Day: an old English pageant was called into being—May poles, May Queens (an adult and a juvenile, the President of the College and his wife appearing ‘anciently’ as the Lord Chancellor and Queen Elizabeth I. This elaborate celebration occurs at Earlham every fourth year; it is not only to remind the people of their origins; it is also to revitalize in them the basic culture which makes them distinctive even within a new cultural situation of which they are part. This happens to both culture and religion. There can be no culture or religion where these elements of continuation or discontinuation are not in operation. Therefore it is wrong to speak of Mizo culture or religion as ‘primitive’.

The emergence of history as the sovereign science of man exercised a tremendous influence on the anthropological study of

\(^{172}\) E. Boloji, African traditional religion, pg 110.
religion. "With it came an emphasis on the nature of primitive reasoning and the stages of its 'evolution into civilized thought'. While the intellectual tradition of the cultural evolutionists has been rejected in the west (especially with the advent of Freud and Durkheim), it is surprising to note that in much of Indian anthropology today there still persists the domination of the historicist's modes of thought in the understanding of culture and religion. This accounts for an unashamed, continuous description of tribal religions (including the Mizo religion) as spiritism or animism". My argument against the critics of tribal religions which includes Mizo religion, is based almost entirely on Sujata Miri's, 'Introduction to the study of tribal religions' where she builds up a strong thesis against the understanding of tribal cultures' conception of God and other deities as animistic.

With the advent of science, she points out, educated Europeans began to account for their own religion as arising out of misunderstanding from false analogical reasoning and ignorance of natural causes. Accordingly, the religion of the uneducated and unscientific peoples appeared still more compounded of error and misunderstanding. The simplest form of religion, "animism", as Tylor had called it, arose so he thought, when primitive peoples had reflected

173 H.O.Mawrie, Khasi milieu, pg 1.
174 Ibid.
upon their experience of immaterial forms in dreams or considered the
difference between a living man and his corpse. Accordingly for him
primitive religion was a means towards a knowledge and control of
human circumstance and particularly of the physical world, which in his
day men of science ad already begun to achieve by rational methods.

Influenced by such an approach the early enquiries, mostly
foreign, into Mizo \(^{175}\) religion oversimplified the problems of translation
and interpretation of Mizo ideas and custom. Original writings culled
from Mizo informants were very few. The scholars who claimed the
Mizo mentality as a primitive mentality knew nothing of their language
nor were they intimate with their social and cultural conditions.

To Tylor the minimal definition of religion was “a belief in
spiritual beings”. Thus the understanding of religion came down to an
understanding of the basis upon which such a belief arose at its most
primitive level. Strangely enough, belief in spirits began as an uncritical
effort to explain such puzzling phenomena as death, dreams and
possessions. Tylor believed that the idea of a soul was used to explain
more and more remote and hitherto inexplicable natural occurrences
until virtually every “tree and rock was haunted by some sort of

\(^{175}\) The author illustrates this point with reference to the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya.
gossamer presence". The "higher", more "developed" forms of "belief in spiritual beings", first polytheism, ultimately monotheism, were founded upon this animistic basis.

It is amazing, but, that writers on Mizo religion cannot till this day shake off their fascination with the idea of "animism". The "experts" on Mizo religion claim the following:

- **Their crude religious notions are what are styled animism.** (Lewis, Lushai, pg 29)

- **Their religion is what is called animist.** (Rev. David Kyles, Lorrian of the Lushais, Romance and realism on the NE Frontiers of India, Carey Press).

- **The Mizo were animistic, primitive in their...** (F. Hrangkhuma, 'Christianity in Mizoram' in 'Christianity in India', pg 267).

- **Under the old animism, the Mizo found himself in a habitat also occupied by countless hostile spirits inhabiting every natural object and regarded as stronger than themselves.** (Dr. John V. Hluna, 'Contribution of Christianity to overall development with
special reference to Mizoram' in 'Impact of Christianity on North East India' pg469).

- They lived in a state of barbaric practice and animistic faith and belief. (The Mizo society in transition, pg 119)

The persistence of the animistic framework, Sujata Miri further states for the study of tribal religions in our country is not really surprising. It is part of the general phenomenon of the persistent domination of imperialist modes of thinking in most other spheres. As in other parts of India the launching of anthropological studies in the context of northeast India was the product of British expansion over India during the nineteenth century. The need to govern the tribes of various races and vastly different cultures created in the rulers the need to study the life and culture of the ruled. "As European knowledge of the non-European world increased and as societies were formed to promote such knowledge, the idea emerged, under the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution and the Victorian idea of progress that the institutions of the non-European represented stages through which the
European had passed long ago. This notion also gave a fillip to European Christian Evangelism”. 176

Evolution was the idea that put into a coherent framework, the fast accumulating knowledge about the culture of the so-called primitives in various parts of the world.

Evolutionism, like it or not, seeks to explain the existence of the diversity of cultures, both in the past and in different places, by subsuming them under different phases in a single path of development; “it is really an attempt to wipe out the diversity of cultures while pretending to accord it full recognition. If the various conditions in which societies are found, both in the past and in the far distant lands, are treated as phases in stages in a single line of development, starting from the same point and leading to the same end, it seems clear that the diversity is merely apparent. Humanity is claimed to be one and the same everywhere but this unity and identity can be achieved only gradually: the variety of cultures we find in the world illustrates the several stages in a process which conceals the ultimate reality and delays our recognition of it” 177. Evolution is thus the refusal to accept the fact that

176 Sociological bulletin, Volume 22, No 2, September 1973, article-“The development of sociology and social anthropology in India” by M.N.Srinivas and M.N.Panini.
177 Claude Levi Strauss “Race and history”, in Race, science and society, pg 102.
the form and development of human life is not everywhere the same. But rather takes the form in an extraordinary diverse realm. Thus everything that does not conform to the evolutionist's system of criteria is either denied the name of culture where standards of values are involve, or are considered vague or unintelligible where it involves meanings and concepts.

According to Sujata Miri, "clarity of a concept is a matter of its place in the total conceptual framework of a culture" 178. When a concept plays a central role in the life of a culture, becoming clear about it coincides with the progressive exploration of this role. Such a central role is played by the concept of Pathian in Mizo religion. Our forefathers attributed and explained that God is:

- “God from above from below (Omnipresent) God, the Creator God. He is Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnipresent”.

The Mizos offered prayers to God and were dependent on Him. The worship of different deities like Pu Vana, Khuanu, Vanhrika, etc may lead us to the conclusion that it was a polytheistic religion, but this would be erroneous. In spite of the propitiations to different deities, the

Theism is actually never abandoned. The Supreme Being retains a predominant place in all cases of sacrifices.

Thus as Sujata Miri comments on Khasi religion, "Instead of looking at Khasi religion as a collection of more or less disconnected activities with more or less disparate areas of human life, we should consider it as a system of meanings with its center in the concept of U Blei. This concept as it were, breathes life into the entire range of activities. In the case of the Mizos it is the pervasive membership of Pathian in this society that makes the most crucial difference in their phenomenology.

Nonetheless it is a historical fact that the conversion of the Mizos from their traditional concept of Pathian to the Christian concept of Pathian was swift. In a very short span of time almost the whole state embraced Christianity. It was a result of complex interplay of diverse impulses, socio-structural and psychological factors. When Christianity was introduced, it was introduced along with other supplementary supports like education, medical works, translation and literary works etc. it had rampant influence among them. Shortly, many people were converted into the Christian faith and belief system. Those converted had
undertaken the responsibility to reach the non-Christian native people by the financial and logical support of the missionaries.

Both in the traditional homogenous religious background as well as in contemporary society, religion has always been a major determinant of life of the Mizos. Prior to the encounter with Christianity traditional religion pervaded and permeated all vital life-interests of the people, investing the social, economic and political facets of life with meaning and symbolic significance. As Christianity crept into the state the religious insight preserved and handed down from one generation to another through oral media as speech forms, proverbs, festivals etc slowly lost its significance.

To account for the large-scale conversion of the Mizos to Christianity various factors are listed. Among them, the following factors are important:

1. Christianity is less expensive.
2. Christianity is less cumbersome.
3. Heaven is open for all.
4. Easy to get education.
5. To free from manual hard toil works.
6. To become Elite and command respect in society.
7. To free from the bondage of slavery.

All these and many more factors played an important role in the conversion of Christianity amongst the Mizos. Since this new life was not natural for them it misplaced them socio-culturally. Many of their cultural elements were either modified or lost. They abandoned many traditional institutions like the bachelor's dormitory, marriage system, village administration, etc. The whole social structure, value system and traditional institutions were ignored and misplaced. Thus the mass conversion brought about the discontinuation of several aspects of the traditional religious culture of the people. The homogenous traditional religious background, in which the tribal religion undergirdled all aspects of life including the social, political and economic aspects, has more or less disappeared, making way for Christianity, which now prevails throughout the state. Huge churches, schools now rise in the former sites of sacred places dedicated to the powerful deities.

Religious conversion is incompatible with the ideal of pluralism especially in a pluralistic society like India. In the conclusion I seek a reference to Gandhi in order to seek a solution to the problem created by this phenomenon. As we are aware Gandhi a deeply religious man took
all decisions on the basis of religion and all his ideas and activities, whether social, economic or political emanated from his religious outlook. Gandhi believed that one could not achieve the ideal of the greatest good of all without removing the political hindrances. Hence it was obligatory on the part of all the right thinking men to take active part in politics. He says, “He who does not love his country does not know his true religion. He used to say that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics, do not know what religion means”[179]. Therefore for Gandhi politics was not differentiated from religion. Religion penetrated every sphere of his life. Though a politician he was deeply religious at heart, just as he comments about himself as he “Most religious men I have met are politicians in disguise, I however, though wear the guise of a politician am at heart a religious”. [180] Also, “My bent is not political, but religious.”[181] It is a popular belief that religion is a matter of individual experience. But modern psychology has shown that there is no such thing as a merely individual experience, which is absolutely cut off from the society. There is an important element of truth in the views of Durkheim and other members of the French sociological school, who maintain that religion, is essentially a social phenomenon. The views of Jesus: “Render to Caesar the things that are

[180] Speeches and writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Madras, 1922, p. 40
Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" \(^{182}\) did not find much favour in Gandhi. Rather his view was more in accordance with the writings of H.G.Wells, according to whom "the doctrine of the kingdom of heaven as Jesus preached it, it was no less than a bold and uncompromising demand for a complete change and the cleansing of the life of our struggling races an utter cleansing without and within"\(^{183}\).

Gandhi's religion was spiritual humanism because he declared that the service of the poor whom he called 'daridranarayana' is a true service of God. In other words, Gandhi found God amidst his creation; this creation is confined not only to India, his own land and not Hinduism alone, the religion to which he belonged. It consisted of men belonging to different lands and different religions.

Gandhi's study of religions led him to the appreciation of the best in every tradition and to the formulation of the concept of 'sarva-dharma-samabhava'; the expression implying the equality of all religions. Dharma is that which helps in the evolution of the soul to a higher level of life and adharma its obstruction. Every religion, in essence, is dharma, since it aims to take human beings to a higher level of life. It is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dhr' which means 'to hold together'; the innermost constitution of a thing, the law of its inner being. It is an

\(^{182}\) Bible.

\(^{183}\) H.G.Wells: 'A short history of the world' P.154
ethical concept, which includes a moral code and the whole range of man’s duties and responsibilities. This dharma is a part of ‘rta’, the fundamental moral law governing the whole universe, and humanity is to act in harmony with this moral order.

Gandhi maintained that one’s religion is like one’s own mother, entitled to one’s highest reverence. He also accepted the moral and spiritual contents of all the great religions as equally valid for their respective followers. He saw no inconsistency in declaring that he “could, without in any way whatsoever impairing the dignity of Hinduism, pay equal respect to the best of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism”. According to Gandhi this reverence for dharma expresses the ideal attitude towards the faiths of other men and their followers. Any religion, any custom, any creed could be brought under its fold and was thus not secular (refer to Chapter III). Gandhi’s concept of religion, therefore, brought under its fold people belonging to different religions. He was concerned with every person, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Zoroastrianism, or Muslim. Answering a question on this, Gandhi said to Reverend Keithan, “All men are born equal and free, but one is much stronger or weaker than another physically and

---

184 Harijan, 30-11-1947
mentally. Therefore superficially there is no equality between the two.
But there is an essential equality. In our nakedness, God is not going to
think of me as Gandhi and you as Keithan. And what are we in this
mighty universe? We are less than atoms, and as between atoms there is
no use asking which is smaller and which is bigger; inherently we are
equal. The differences of race and skin, of mind and body, and of
climate and nature are transitory. In the same way, essentially all
religions are equal. If you read the Bible, you must read it with the eye
of a Christian, if you read the Gita, you must read it with the eye of a
Hindu.... The tree of religion is the same, though there is not that
physical equality between the branches. They are all growing, and the
person who belongs to the growing branch must not gloat over it and say,
'Mine is the superior one'. None is superior and none is inferior to the
other". According to Gandhi each religion is adequate enough and best
for oneself. There is just one God and it is this God that's working in the
midst of all human, all striving to know Him and His will. In this sense
all work towards the same goal. Gandhi writes, "For me, all the principal
religions are equal in the sense that they are all true. They are supplying
a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity".

Gandhian advocated equal respect of all religions. He said:

---

185 Harijan,13-3-1937
186 Harijan,6-4-1939
Let me explain what I mean by all religions. It is the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the maker and itself.

Young India, 12 May 1920.

There is no religion higher than truth and righteousness.
Ethical religion, p. 49.

If a man reaches the heart of his own religion he has reached the heart of the others too.
Polak, p. 41.

Gandhi's assertion here about the "heart" of religion, about "true religion" is not an empirical one in either the sense that he arrived at it by means of an empirical investigation of different religions of the world; or that the discovery of a religion which did not have such a core would
falsify his claim. Although Gandhi’s knowledge of both Christianity and Islam was profound, he did not study either religion with a view, as it were, to conforming his hypothesis about “essence” of religion. Gandhi’s belief springs on the one hand, from his “original” conviction that it is impossible that God does not exist, and on the other hand from the idea that the mark of a true religion is that it affords primarily an insight into this truth. If it is claimed that there could be a religion which does not afford such an insight, Gandhi’s reply would be either that the religion in question has been fundamentally misconceived by its critics (who were most likely to have been people belonging to a different religion, or that an unlikely even- the full potentialities of the religion have not been realized. In the latter case, as Gandhi would argue, it is the task of people belonging to another faith not to criticize the religion so as to persuade its adherents to abandon it, but rather to help it realize its own potentialities. This point will become clear from a consideration of the other two statements.

Gandhi believed that the network of beliefs, doctrines, theories and stories associated with any religion is the product of a particular culture and tradition, and that, therefore, they are historically conditioned. As such, they are subject to changes (they could, for instances, be made philosophically more sophisticated); open to newer
interpretations, and even to partial rejection. No such network of beliefs etc. can therefore claim absolute finality or perfection. They are all more or less imperfect. "And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error. Reverence to other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faith also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects. Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable features of other faith". (Sabarmati)

Every religion has its own mode or modes of worship. But one thing is common to all these modes of worship are their use of what Gandhi calls "symbolism". Symbols vary widely from one religion to another, or even within the same religion; by as symbol no one symbol or set of them can claim logical superiority over another. Logically each one is on par with another whether it is an idol, or a sacred grove, or a sacred stone or a tree, or a holy river, book or a temple, mosque or a church. One chooses one’s mode of worship according to one’s tradition and inclination- none is in principle, preferable to another.
The only proper relationship between religions is, therefore what Gandhi calls an “international fellowship”. The idea of the fellowship is to be understood in terms of mutual co-existence based on the above discussion.

According to Gandhi, everyone should be rooted in their respective traditions and then purify them if necessary. He was against proselytization. He said, "Religion is a matter of life and death. A man does not change his religion as he changes his garments. He takes it with him beyond the grave. Nor a man professes his religion to oblige others. He professes religion because he cannot do otherwise" 187. He was against certain forms of missionary activities specially those relating to conversion. Gandhi was not opposed to conversion if it was based on one’s will but he was against any use of force or propaganda in the matter of conversion. As he remarked, ‘a rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon. The fragrance of religion and spiritual life is much finer and much subtler than that of a rose’ 188.

Gandhi does not allow the change of religion from one to another. He wants that one remain in his ancestral religion. He did not believe in

---

187 Young India, 23-9-1926
188 M. K. Gandhi, ‘In search of the Supreme’ Vol11 P.83
taking a man out of his natural surroundings of his own religion and putting him in an alien religion. "I hold that proselytizing under the cloak of humanitarian work is, to say the least, unhealthy. It is most certainly resented by the people here. Religion, after all, is a deeply personal matter; it touches the heart. Why should I change my religion because a doctor who professes Christianity has cured me of some disease or why should the doctor expect or suggest such a change whilst I am under his influence? Or why should I in a missionary educational institution have Christian teaching thrust upon me? In my opinion, these practices are not uplifting and give rise to suspicion if not even secret hostility." 189 and also adds, “Conversion and service go ill together” 190.

Gandhi believed that religion is best spread through the noble lives of its followers. He states as, “To live the Gospel is the most effective way.... most effective in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. Preaching jars on me and makes no appeal to me, and I get suspicious of missionaries who preach; but I love those who never preach but live the life according to their lights. There lives are a silent and yet most effective testimony. Therefore I cannot say what to preach, but I can say that a life of service and uttermost simplicity is the best preaching. A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its

---

189 Young India, 23-4-1931.
190 Ibid., 19-1-1928
fragrance. The fragrance is its sermon. If it had human understanding and if it could engage a number of preachers, the preachers would not be able to sell more roses than the fragrance itself could do. The fragrance of religious and spiritual life is much finer and subtler than that of the rose.\textsuperscript{191}

Therefore according to Gandhi, changing of religions is unnecessary. He says, "If a person wants to believe in the Bible let him say so; but why should he discard his own religion...Religion is a very personal matter. We should be living the life according to our lights share the best with one another, thus adding to the sum total of human effort to reach God."\textsuperscript{192}

If what I have said in the preceding pages hold good then I am compelled to assert categorically that the missionary approach to the traditional Mizo concept of God was biased and misleading. They did not preach the gospel as one more insight into what Gandhi called Truth but as the only Truth. Hence instead of enriching the traditional religion they led the Mizos to its rejection and substitution with a new religion i.e, Christianity.

\textsuperscript{191} Harijan, 29-3-1935
\textsuperscript{192} Young India, 23-9-1926
As I have pointed out in Chapter III (pg 117), all tribal religions contain everything that is required of a so-called developed or true religion. Whether they lack a written tradition or the complicated rituals and clergy of other world religions, they teach in their own way the “truth of living” (refer page 126) and as such are worthy of as much respect as any other religion. In the end I cannot help noting from therefore as Mrinal and Sujata Miri\textsuperscript{193} concludes on Gandhian thoughts about tribal religions and on the phenomenon of conversion in the North East region of our country; (i) The idea of “international fellowship” must naturally be extended to tribal religions. (ii) Conversion from one religion (say, a tribal religion) to another (say, Christianity, Islam or Hinduism) frequently involves a violation of the principles of fellowship, some of the likely consequence are: (a) the convert’s loss of spiritual moorings; (b) an increasing identification of religion with what Gandhi calls the “dust of creeds”, (c) a conscious and deliberate denial to oneself the sources of creativity inherent in one’s own past resulting in a sense of inadequacy which may have quite unexpected manifestations.