CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

My thesis titled 'Mizo concept of God and conversion' is a conceptual exploration of Mizo religion with more emphasis laid on the Mizo concept of God. With an oral tradition, the Mizos did not have any sacred scriptural writings like the other world religions; due to this it is often interpreted as an 'under-developed', 'undeveloped religion'. The critics have gone to the extent of claiming that the Mizos had 'no religion'. Presence of the numerous deities in the Mizo pantheon has also led missionaries and scholars to label the religion as 'animism'. In my first three chapters I have tried to (a) define traditional Mizo religion, (b) philosophically explicate the traditional Mizo concept of God, and (c) compare it with the Christian concept of God. I have also tried to argue against the validity of the above captions labelled with reference to the traditional religion. The following chapter consists of a discussion of the Christian concept of conversion; I conclude the thesis with Gandhi's viewpoints on the concept of religious conversion. The dissertation consists of the following chapters:
1. Introduction

2. God and religion

3. Mizo concept of God

4. Concept of conversion.

5. Conclusion.

Religion is a word overladen with definitions by scholars from different fields. The most common definitions would have the idea of God in most great world religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. It is the discovery of the Holy through interpretation, followed by all the many forms of communication through which persons interrelate. The ultimate reality differently described as: reality beyond appearance; the depth of being; the power, which keeps everything that is in existence; the power of being. These different expressions are termed God. The term occupies a central concept in religion. John Hick says, "........................there is but one God, who is the maker and Lord of all; that in his finite fullness and richness of being he exceeds all our human attempts to grasp him in thought; and that the devout in the various great world religions are in fact worshipping that one God, but through different, overlapping concepts or
mental icons of Him”. The Oxford Advanced Dictionary of English defines religion as “belief in the existence of a supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe who has given man spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body”. These definitions show that the essence of religion lies in our inner experience. We realize that there is an absolute power, which is superior to man. Therefore there exists a sense of human dependence manifested in terms of prayer, sacrifice and faith which exercises a major influence in the life of man. I wish to claim that this applies to traditional Mizo religion also. Mizo religion is the belief and worship of an unseen and unknown power, and includes a relationship between this idea of God and human beings.

The idea of God has led to the formulation of various theories such as pantheism and theism regarding the God-world relationship. The experience of a God according to the theist is the most important, most universal and the central concept of religion. God is the highest reality, the highest value and the highest end. God becomes related to the world and it is this relation between God and the world that has been discussed time and again. The main question has been one of transcendence and immanence. Accepting God as the first or primary cause of the world

---

presumes that the materials with which the world is made exists outside God. This leads to the difficulty of a duality between God and the materials of the universe, and the necessity of establishing a relation between the two. If God is believed to be the material cause of the world responsible for creating the world out of His own self, then he becomes subject to the difficulty of assimilating within himself such elements as the physical nature of the world, lack of harmony, absence of uniformity, etc. The problem of duality rises again if God is believed to exist outside the world, while the notion of his omnipresence is open to objections having their origin in the world of religion where he has to assume the form of a person in order to be able to answer prayer and reward, faith, devotions, etc. In the process of discussion of his manner of relation to the world, philosophers have given various possible alternative theories.

In Polytheistic religions, we have a multitude of Gods. There is scarcely anything in the world that has not at the same time been deified, or at least regarded as the emblem, the manifestation, and the temporary dwelling place of some god. Sacred stones and mountains, trees and oases; ruling chiefs and kings, the family hearth, the sun, the moon, and the stars, the ancestors, heroes of the tribe, the rain and lightning, etc. All these and innumerable others have been worshipped as divine, or have at least shared divine honours through a contagion that spreads to
everything intimately associated with the God. Out of these overlapping and conflicting deities, gods emerge into special prominence and under their sovereignty a pantheon of Gods is formed, with distinctive functions but all related to each other. The king God in this pantheon e.g. Shiva in Saivism, Pathian in Mizo religion absorb the nature and functions of the rest and the other Gods become different manifestations of one supreme deity known by other different names in different aspects. To have a common intention amongst the various ideas of God, sociologists after Emile Durkheim first admit that there is something sacred and holy in the social ties that bind together families, tribes and nations.

Some religions like the Chinese worship the family oven and household gate, the Japanese has its emperor as its beloved head, some believe in ancestral ghost etc, all which are firmly held as if the community's life depended on it. They all owe religious reverence to their family, community and nation from which the very stuff of their life is drawn increasing their strength and security for a meaningful existence. It is a matter of relationship and connection to their social group giving meaning to their personality by enmeshing in a network of social connections identifying themselves with the larger social life that surrounds them.
One can also admit that there is something sacred and holy in the powers of nature by which man’s life is surrounded and supported. Since the beginning, man’s relation has been greatly dependent on Mother Nature. In all environments men have reckoned upon the support of some powers as allies in their struggle with the more unfriendly forces. Sun, rain, soil etc have been recognized as gods and goddesses in every quarter of the globe. This has led to the worshipping of nature, defining God in terms of nature, as that which is divine.

Finally there’s something sacred and holy in man’s inward sense of unrealized possibilities, which makes him turn rebel against himself and his environment and dream of better things yet to be.

All highly organized religions are at one in the verdict that man’s trust and allegiance can rightly be offered to a being or beings made manifest partly through human institutions, partly through nature, and partly prophetic discernment of ideal values and possibilities\(^2\). There is a persistent tendency in the higher religions to push back all particular social bodies, natural objects, and prophetic words to some more ultimate and enduring reality of which they are regarded as the

---

temporary expressions or "manifestations". This tendency arises from the universal religious quest for something sufficiently great and enduring to be lifted above the flux of things in which we are involved. In and through these temporal realities something more enduring and more unified is glimpsed to which we commit ourselves with unreserved devotion. "The One endures; the many change and pass"; and this enduring One is for religion no dead philosophical abstraction, but a living unity like that which binds the members of a family to one another, across many generations.

Religion, for the Mizos was part and parcel of the Mizo society. The community held its beliefs; the ceremonies were performed mainly in groups or by a group of the family, by relatives or by the whole population of one area. It was an essential part of the way of life of each people. We cannot understand the Mizo society without understanding its religion. It is well integrated into the different areas of their lives. It is their religion, which gave Mizos a sense of security in life.

It may be noted that there is no word in the Mizo language for religion as such. The Mizo language of course has words referring to religious ideas, religious practices, prayers, etc. 'Sakhua' is the nearest

---

3 Quoted from Walter. H. Horton, God, pg 9.
Mizo equivalent used for the translation of ‘religion’. It is a compound word formed from ‘sa’ and ‘khua’, which latter came to be known as ‘sakhua’. It is difficult to give a particular definition of sakhu; different interpretations have been given even amongst the Mizo scholars themselves. The term has been variously interpreted, as meat, nature, village etc. It is a compound word formed from ‘sa’ and ‘khua’, which later came to be known as ‘sakhua’. It is difficult to give a particular definition of sakhu; different interpretations have been given even amongst the Mizo scholars themselves. In short the term would refer to God, called Pathian. Saiathanga in his book entitled ‘Mizo Sakhua’ defined it as - “The Mizo sakhua is simply worship of ramhuai, jungle spirit”⁴ in the attempt to define the meaning of sakhu scholars like Lal Biak Thanga have given a literal interpretation of it - ‘sa’ as meat and ‘khua’ as village or nature whereas Zawla infers as - “The original roots of the term sakhu are ‘sa’ and ‘khua’ each of which means Pathian, and a combination of the two makes sakhu.”⁵ This definitions run in parallel with Liangkhaia’s definition of sakhu as - “The main object of our worship were ‘sa’ and ‘khua’ and we combine the two to make ‘sakhua’⁶. Hrangthiauva and Lalchungnunga too are of the view that sakhu is the belief of worship of one good unseen God, Pathian.

---

⁴ Saiathanga, Mizo sakhua, pg 1.
⁵ Zawla, Mizo pg 78.
⁶ Liangkhaia, Mizo sakhua pg 2.
residing in heaven, the creator of all and one who blesses and protects his creations. It is this Pathian, along with the good spirits believed to reside everywhere, above and below the earth that is worshipped. I have tried to explain and give the actual meaning of the word 'sakhua'.

It was believed that between God and human beings there were other beings that populated the universe, the spirits. These spirits were mainly connected with the earth, hills, mountains, trees, forests, water in various forms (such as lakes, ponds, rivers, waterfalls), animals diseases etc. Due to the presence of these spirits, missionaries and scholars have commented as - “Their crude religious notions are what are styled Animism”7. Kyles interprets it as, “They do not worship any gods, or goddesses but are keenly aware of the unseen spirit world of which they are terribly afraid every moment of their lives”8. Kyles goes to the extent of saying - “They have no religion at all”9. Most writers characterized it as an animistic worship of evil spirit10 such as “The people were animists”11 or “Their religion is what is called Animist”12. I have argued against this notion of animism given to traditional Mizo religion.

---

7 Lewis, Lushai. Pg 29.
8 Rev. David Kyles, Lorrain of the Lushais- Romance and realism on the N.E. Frontiers of India, Carey Press.
9 Ibid, Pg 6.
10 Mc Call, Lushai, pg 67; Kyles Lorrain, pg6; Ray, Mizoram, pg 62.
12 Rev. David Kyles, Lorrain of the Lushais- Romance and realism on the N.E. Frontiers of India, Carey Press
The third chapter discusses the concept of God in traditional Mizo thought. The significance of this concept has been lost to us for a period of time especially after the coming of Christianity. This chapter is the analysis of this concept philosophically bringing out its various aspects. God of the Mizo traditional religion is known as ‘Pathian’. Superficial perception of the religion has led a number of scholars to label this religion as mere ‘animism’. However a deep and sincere research shows that Mizo traditional religion had a definite concept of God named ‘Pathian’. Several terms were used to refer to Pathian but each had been used with distinctive reasons. Based on the manifestation of his nature and characteristics the following terms were used while referring to Pathian- Pathian, Khuanu, Sa, Pu Vana, Vanhrika, Khuavang. I have analyzed these different terms used to describe Pathian.

Scholars dealing with tribal religion have often tried to fit tribal religion into this or that theoretical scheme, as ‘undeveloped’ etc. But here I raise the question-c as what is that which makes up religion? What really determines the quality of religion? What is the basis of regarding tribal religions as primitive, compared to the doctrinaire religions? I try and answer these questions towards the end of the third chapter.
The fourth chapter discusses the concept of conversion. The history and phenomenon of religious conversion is complex, varied and has always been an issue of friction in a pluralistic situation, where the process of change affects one's religion, society and culture. In recent times, particularly in India, it is interesting to observe certain so-called religious organizations that want to ostracize and shelve every question related to conversion, so as to make us believe that conversion as a human response does not exist at all, or does not want to make room for it. There has also been renewed interest in legislating against 'conversion activities'. Therefore, here I have tried to define and study the meaning and concept of conversion and look at how a Christian understanding of conversion may be viewed.

The basic meaning of the Latin term *convertere* is 'to turn' or 'to change'. Conversion to Christianity is both theological and cultic. It may also be sociological. It is theological because conversion is a spiritual experience seeking an adequate theological conceptualization. Cultic, because it is brought about by a sacramental ritual called "baptism"; finally, sociological, in so far as it bestows a sociological identity on the
person, by incorporating him into a group of the baptized, or the “church”\(^{13}\).

Spiritual conversion means to be changed, turned, transformed, renewed, reborn, reconciled and restored; it is a process which affects the total life-way of the convert. Closely related to the whole conversion concept are terms such as repentance, confession, faith, reconciliation and relationship which imply deep religious and ethical sensitivities, leading to the resolution and verdict to change one’s lifestyle and world-view; they imply transformation of the old way of life, leading to a new way of life. It may also be understood as the dimension of change away from something old and undesirable or in other words an aspect of change toward something new and desirable.

Therefore, conversion is a term for change and implying an alteration of a former state. To quote Louis. J. Luzbetak - “Conversion means a “turning” away from old ways to new ways, a basic reorientation in premises and goals, a whole-hearted acceptance of a new set of values affecting the “convert” as well as his social group, ..........every sphere of activity- economic, social, and religious”\(^{14}\).

\(^{13}\) C.R.Agera, Conversion to Christianity in Mission Vol VI (1999), pg 229
\(^{14}\) Quoted by Hans Kasdorf, Christian conversion in context, pg 25.
There is extensive literature related to the Biblical understanding of conversion, which I have touched only in a minimal way here. The Old Testament deals with 'conversion' largely within the people of God. The Hebrew word is 'shub', usually used as a verb, 'to turn'. It is about turning to God or returning to God. In the New Testament, the main words involved are 'metanoein', 'metanoia', and 'epistrophi'. It involves an act of faith, trust and obedience, and of accompanying action.

Besides the discussion of the concept I have also tried to find out the transformations that have taken place in the major concepts in the Mizo concept of God. Traditional Mizos believed that Pathian created the universe and everything in it. He was the creator-God. Though the traditional Mizos do not have an elaborated myth on the process of creation, Pathian was believed to possess, the creative power of creating men, world the heavens and everything under it. Pathian was believed to reside somewhere beyond human reach, above the skies. Hence, the usual appellation 'Chung Pathian' i.e. God above. The elders believed of His immanence and omnipresence. His presence was everywhere- above, below and around, encircling their surroundings. Pathian's transcendence can be considered in terms of space and

15 Dr. Sangkima, Mizos society and social change, pg 52; Challiana, Pipu Nun, pg 22; Col.V.Lunghnema, Mizo chanchin, pg 178.
distances. When the traditional Mizos call God as “Chung Pathian” i.e. “God above” or say “Van kara leng Pathian” (Pathian who dwells in the high heavens) it implies that there is nothing higher than God, thinking primarily in spatial terms. When the sky is clear it exhibits the infinite space and distance. Pathian is “above” this or higher than this boundless distance and space. They would associate God with the sky, the sun and the heavens, all of which suggest great distance and aid men in trying to comprehend and describe the transcendence of God. Similarly, the natural sounds of thunder shows the omnipotence of Pathian. When there’s thunder they would say, “Pu Vanan a thlengpui a hnuk ri ani” meaning “Pu Vana is dragging his rice platter”. This gives the idea of Pu Vana’s mighty power. Thunder was not just an impersonal force of nature but the mighty action of God.

Acceptance of Christianity led to the various modifications, replacements or annihilation of certain concepts. An in-depth study of both the religions show that the change that took place in religion was not a change of two completely diverse faiths, but what we may call a translation and a transformation at the conceptual level. Various concepts such as the concept of the Creator God, concept of life after death i.e. the existence of mitthi khua and pialral for the spirit of the
dead and various other concepts that were already present in the previous religion were translated and strengthened by Christianity.

My conclusion rests on Gandhi's viewpoints on conversion and change of faith. Reference has been made to his thesis of equal respect for all religions. Gandhiji, 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. He suggested conversion to mean a, “definite growing up of the evil of the old, adoption of all the good of the new. Conversion should therefore mean a life of greater dedication to one's own country, greater surrender to God, and greater self-purification” 16.

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” 17.

16 Ibid., 20-8-1925
17 Young India, 23-9-1926