Chapter 4

Inculturation and Conversion
Conversion to Christianity has given rise to many problems, such as (a) alienation of the converts, and consequently (b) erosion of the parent community. A grasp of these problems perhaps has compelled some Hindus to react so vigorously against conversions, and thereby to defend their own existence. There have been some sincere attempts on the part of Indian Christians to understand these problems sympathetically, from the point of view of the Hindus, and to meet them sincerely. One such attempt has been to emphasize the need of inculturation of the converts, which, it is hoped, will remove the possibility of alienation of the converts from their parent community, and ultimately remove the possibility of any erosion of the Hindu community. 'How far are such attempts at inculturation successful?'. This is the question that draws our attention in this chapter.

We shall discuss this question against the background of the views of Fr. Staffner, as expressed in his paper and his book. The aim, however, is not to consider his views so much as the implications of such views as those similar to S's. He stands for a particular trend of thought which is prevalent among certain Indian Christian theologians. After a brief presentation of S's position in the first Section, we shall try to probe into the implications of his views regarding the
possibility of inculturation. Then in the final Section, we shall consider the validity of the approach, adopted by S., in working out the possibility of inculturation.

(i.) Fr. Staffner's position - an exposition

The views of S. have to be seen in their context. He is considering some problems arising in connection with conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. He sees them from the Hindu point of view. As things stand in India, he says, conversion to Christianity is bound to appear to Hindus primarily as a social and civil event. For, first in the eyes of law, baptism is taken to be a proof that a person has changed his community. In the recent years the Supreme Court has repeatedly given directions that a person who has performed an act of formal conversion cannot be considered as belonging to the Hindu Law. By baptism a Hindu changes his law of inheritance; he ceases to be under the Hindu Law and is, in future, under the Indian Christian Marriage Act. By ceasing to be under the Hindu Law a convert ceases to be a member of the joint family. He also ceases to be a co-parcener from the moment of his conversion and is entitled to receive his share in the joint family property as it stood at the date of his conversion. The convert himself keeps the interest in the joint family property as it stood at the moment of his conversion, but his descendants are disqualified from inheriting property from any of their Hindu relatives.
Owing to these and other social changes, S. observes, baptism is popularly supposed to involve a complete break with the past, a disloyalty to the whole cultural and spiritual heritage of which Hindus are rightly proud. Consequently the convert is regarded with a mixture of contempt and horror, not on account of what he has embraced, but on account of what he has renounced.

A further observation of S. is that as long as conversion signifies a change of social community, every endeavour to spread the Gospel of Christ will appear in the wrong light. The missionaries' efforts at evangelization will be seen as an attempt to increase the numerical strength of the Indian Christian community at the expense of the larger community. S. himself confirms his observation with a remark made by local secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha at Pune. S. once asked the other why they were so much against conversion. And the reply of the secretary to S. was: "First came the Mohammedans and spread their religion with the result that India was divided into Hindustan and Pakistan, now the Christians try to spread their religion. What will be the result? Padristan!"

As long as the change of religion is thus identified with a change of community, every endeavour to spread the message of Christ will boil down to a struggle for dominance
and a competition in all the spheres in which the interests of one civil community are opposed to those of another: political and economic power, employment, privileges etc. The spread of the Christian religion, then, will naturally become a threat to the Hindu community. The conversion of India to Christianity would mean the extinction of the Hindu Community also in the merely social and civil sense. This observation of S. appears to be very much true also. For, even an official Report, such as that of the Niyogi Committee, is interspersed with many statements which reflect the same fear. In the recent years, even much more loudly are made such allegations as this: "The main mission of the Christian missionaries is to detach the Christian from his nation and make him a foreigner in his own country". No wonder then that the missionary work of Christians is suspect and is interpreted by many a Hindu, as 'communal aggression' resulting in 'erosion of their community'.

But all these fears, according to S., are rooted in a false assumption that the acceptance of Christian faith and membership in the Hindu community are mutually exclusive or that the practice of Christian faith is incompatible with legal and social membership in the Hindu community. And he wants to show that a Hindu's change of religion need not involve a change of his own community socially and culturally.
Accepting baptism is a spiritual event, and not a social event, necessitating a change of one's community. It is a change of heart which is made possible by accepting Christ as the Saviour, not necessarily involving a severing of one's ties with his community for all social, civic and cultural purposes. Thus, S's solution to the problems of conversion consists in inculturation of the converts with the parent community.

Not only does S. suggest the solution, but he also works out its possibility in a rather detailed way, both theoretically and practically. Our concern although, is only the theoretical side, here. It consists in three stages: (a) he inquires into what is essential to being a Catholic; (b) he also inquires into what is essential to being a member of the Hindu community. Then on the basis of (a) and (b) he decides that being Catholic in religion and being a Hindu in community are not exclusive.

As regards (a), S. holds that what is required of a Catholic is "the following of a certain way of salvation," namely, "accepting Jesus Christ as the way to God, our Father". And he is not bound to follow a particular way of social behaviour. "Nothing is common to all Catholics except their faith, worship, and obedience to the Church in matters of religion and morality." Whereas with regard
to (b), he argues, "being a Hindu does not depend on holding a certain creed or on practising a certain form of worship, or on professing loyalty to any religious founder. Being a Hindu means having been born into a social group which is recognised as belonging to the Hindu community and avoiding everything that would lead to one's separation from the group in which one was born." ¹⁴

Further, he remarks that we cannot speak of Hindu religion as religion in the sense in which we can speak of the Catholic religion. For, while it is the religion that determines a man whether he is a Catholic or not, there is no unity of belief or practice that determines a Hindu. Yet we can speak of Hindu religion in the sense that it happens to be practised by the Hindus. ¹⁵ And what determines the term 'Hindu' is the geographical boundary. The Invaders coming from the Khyber Pass are said to have referred to the people beyond the Indus River as Hindus. ¹⁶ These people themselves being different and of varied groups, their religions were also different, all of which in the course of history, were more or less integrated into one common mythology. That is how it is now known as one religion, even though it is actually a mixture of religions. ¹⁷

Thus, according to S. the word 'religion', when applied to Catholicism and Hinduism, is to be understood differently.
Being a Catholic by religion means following a certain way of salvation, namely accepting Jesus Christ as the way to God. On the other hand, being a Hindu by religion means living in a particular way, so far as social customs, diet, inter-dining and other forms of social life are concerned. This point of difference is further elaborated by S. with the help of a distinction between sadhana dharma and samaj dharma. He characterises the Catholic religion as sadhana dharma rather than samaj dharma, because it proposes Jesus Christ as the way to God, and does not prescribe any distinct way of life as far as social customs, diet, inter-dining, ritual purity is concerned. Whereas Hindu religion is more of a samaj dharma than a sadhana dharma, because a Hindu is free to choose any 'marga' or any way of salvation i.e. any sadhana dharma that appeals to him. But he is bound by the rules regarding diet, ritual purity and various forms of social behaviour, according to different castes.18

From all this, S. thinks he could now conclude that theoretically there is no contradiction in being a Catholic Hindu. A person could thus profess the Catholic faith and at the same time remain socially in the Hindu community. For, 'as Hinduism is primarily a samaj dharma, the Catholic faith is essentially a sadhana dharma, they are on different planes and need not clash'.19
Is Inculturation a possible solution to the problems of conversion?

From the foregoing account, it is clear that there are actually three distinct parts in S's presentation of his views. First there is the statement of the problems of conversion. Second, the suggestion of his solution in terms of distinguishing between 'religion' and 'community' so that, when a Hindu gets converted to Christianity, his change of religion need not imply a change of community, but rather he could be inculturated with the parent community in every respect except religion. Finally, there is the actual working out of the possibility of this solution, in terms of his distinction between the sadhana dharma and samaj dharma. We may postpone the consideration of the second part of his answer to the next Section. For the present, let us consider whether his suggestion of answer is tenable or not.

It is indeed undeniable that there is a distinction between 'religion' and 'community', although they are very closely interrelated. The fact of different religions in one community, as well as the fact of the same religion spreading to different communities support the distinction between religion and community. Theoretically, therefore, there does not seem to be any difficulty in holding that one's change of religion does not imply a change of one's community. That it has also been the practice is clear from even a cursory
glance at the history of the ancient tradition of Christianity. The rise of the 'new faith' out of the Jewish community really meant an emergence of a new framework, an altogether new vision of things centering around Christic experience. All the members of that 'new religion' being Jews as they were, they continued to be Jews as before, they continued to practise everything of the Jewish Law, but with a new significance, attached to the Old. Nevertheless, that did not mean that when the new religion spread to new and different communities it spread as a champion of Jewish culture, but rather it got rooted afresh in every new culture it went.

This becomes very clear from the controversy which arose already at the time of its inception. The whole controversy started when some of the Jewish Christians wanted to identify the Jewish customs and practices with those of the 'new religion' and even wanted to impose them on the converts from other communities. But there were others, led by no less a person than the great Apostle St. Paul, who argued that the core of the new religion was the faith in Jesus Christ, and the new law of love given by Him, rather than the law of the Jewish community. The controversy became so acute that a Council of the Apostles and the Elders had to be convened to settle the dispute. The verdict of the Council of Jerusalem was that nothing of the Jewish Law will be imposed on the converts except the necessaries. Thus
although certain continuity from its parent community was upheld, yet a discontinuity from it was also decisively affirmed, accepting thereby the possibility of inculturation of the converts according to their own parent community as well.

As a result then, to whatever community it went — be it the Graeco-Roman societies, or the countries of Syria, Egypt or of northern Europe, or later the Slave community of Eastern Europe — it always absorbed the socio-cultural elements of the place into its worship, integrated the local modes of thought in elaborating its theology, adopted the local customs and practices for evolving its spirituality. However, things changed when it went to Western Europe. The inculturation that took place there was so thorough and transforming that it became over-identified with the culture of that community. With the result, when the missionary expansion coincided with the colonial expansion of the Western countries, the Gospel was transmitted in the already-developed cultural expression of the West, so much so that people began to refer to Western culture as Christian culture. Hence, acceptance of the Christian faith meant adoption of the Western socio-cultural life, more or less alienated from the indigenous culture, social milieu and its religious traditions. Perhaps it is this which make Hindus identify the Christian religion with the Western culture, and also think that change of religion
However, such an identification of religion by the Westerners with their culture was purely a historical accident. Sometimes it was the 'noble cause' that compelled them to convert the Hindus also culturally. Coming into contact with public manifestations of the Hindu beliefs in their decadent forms, they were so much convinced of their 'spiritually perilous condition' that they thought it was their duty to save them by all the means they could avail themselves of. The best way of preventing the converts from relapsing into their old ways of 'idolatry' and 'superstition' was, they thought, to break the converts from all their cultural ties and connections with their parent community. Of course they might have been politically also motivated. Whatever might have been the reasons, it was not in the essential requirement of the Christian religion that the converts should be alienated from their own community and form a new and different community, cut off from the parent community in all possible ways. If it had happened it was actually against the spirit of the ancient and venerable tradition of Christianity.

This is confirmed by the fact that there were some notable exceptions, already during the time of the Portuguese, who not only opposed the westernizing attitude of those people
but positively promoted the process of inculturation of the converts. Missionaries like M. Ricchi in China, Robert de Nobili in India, maintained that the converts should not be forced to relinquish their community ties but rather be encouraged to live as Hindus socially and culturally. To quote but one instance, de Nobili says: "The holy spiritual law which I proclaim obliges no man to renounce his caste or to do anything incompatible with his caste-honour. Whoever maintains that this law is peculiar to the Prancius or the Paraiah commits a great sin." 27

Among the converts also there were many prominent men who distinguished between religion and community, and clearly proclaimed that their conversion to Catholicism meant just acceptance of a new faith. But that would not affect their continuing to remain as Hindus culturally and socially. Kali Charan Banerji, Nehemiah Mikainath Shastri Gore, Brahma bandab Upadhyaya, were those, to mention a few only, who openly declared: "In customs and manners, in observing caste and social distinctions, in eating and drinking, in our life and living we are genuine Hindus... but in regard to our immortal souls we are Catholic. We are Hindu Catholics." 28

Today the programme of inculturation has taken the turn of a movement among the Indian Christians. For nearly two decades since Vatican II, attempts have been made to inculturate
the Church at all levels, catechetical, liturgical, theological, even in administration, training of priests, life-style, and so on. How strongly the Indian Christians are feeling in favour of inculturation of the Church can be seen by the following citation. Backed up by the vision of Vatican II, and its clear statements on inculturation,\(^2^9\) an indigenous theologian, Fr. D. S. Amalorpavadass observes:

"Likewise the local Church...can no more be either a duplicate copy of foreign models, or aping whatever is found in the West, or a perpetuation of them in terms of organization, preaching, church structures, ministries etc.; nor can it be a momentous repetition in art, architecture, language and music, of the model of the countries or origin from which these Churches emanated. It is high time that we...started, joining with our fellowmen in full solidarity and commitment in the historical process, sharing their concerns, struggling for the same cause. It is high time that we started on our faith from this commitment and looked for means to express our Christian experience and sharing them with our fellowmen in the reality of our life."\(^3^0\)

Thus, when seen in this perspective (viz. given that inculturation of converts was the practice of the ancient Christian tradition, but that it was overlooked for some time merely for historical reasons, and that it has again been
revived and is stressed today) the contention of Fr. S. that Christianity need not be identified with any particular community but rather be inculturated with every community, seems to be tenable. And it seems just that the distinction between 'religion' and 'community' must be maintained. So we may safely say that S's grasp of the solution to the problems of conversion in terms of inculturation is sound and proper. It falls in the proper direction. It is in line with the ancient tradition of Christianity.

Not only that. The purpose for which S. holds this distinction is also likely to be served. For, once the Indian Christians remove the garb of a culturally western Christianity, western theology, foreign liturgy, an imported spirituality, an alien art, architecture, church organization etc., but, on the contrary they are rooted in the same culture and tradition of the parent community, then there will be no room for them to face the problem of alienation. Consequently, the fear of erosion that has grappled the mind of the majority community is very likely to be washed away: Once the Indian Christians start seeing their faith from their commitment to the same cultural heritage, and start to express their faith-experience of Christ from among the rich native modes of thought,-- as Fr. Amalorpavadass has expressed in the citation above -- once they begin to show the same mind and
heart as that of the majority community in all the realities of life, and, once they realize that "Christ's mission is to be no more understood in terms of imperialist conquest, geographical expansion, territorial limits, numerical additions, but by an all-round, ever-ready presence in the socio-cultural milieus through the spirit of Christ which is one of humble and loving service, losing one's false identity in order to find a new identity, which will be genuinely Christian," then, surely the majority community will not have a ground for developing any fear of being eroded by them.

Thus, the distinction S. makes between 'religion' and 'community' insofar as it implies the possibility of the converts being inculturated with their parent community, is not only tenable but also worthwhile. With the help of this distinction S. is able to establish the feasibility of the suggestion he makes regarding inculturation as the solution to the problems of alienation of the converts as well as the fear of erosion of the parent community. Now it remains for us to see how far he succeeds in his actual way of working the possibility of his solution. This we shall try to analyse in the following Section.

(jii) S's understanding of religions

S's whole way of working out the solution consists in understanding Christianity and Hinduism in terms of sadhana
The main reason for holding (a) is that, what is essential in being a Christian is just acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Saviour, and not a distinctly a social way of life, as far as social customs, diet etc., are concerned. But we may raise a question here: what does it mean to accept Jesus Christ as the Saviour? It cannot merely be an acceptance of a statement that Jesus Christ is the Saviour. It has to mean accepting a whole set of beliefs, doctrines, rituals and practices. Presumably S. will say that all the beliefs, doctrines etc., prescribed in Christianity are only in so far as the religious pursuit is concerned, but not with regard to one's communitarian life. But, can the message of Christ be accepted any meaningfully, without an understanding of its socio-cultural context? One may be ready to shed Christianity of all its accessories. But the essentials that belong to the fundamental tradendum at least have to be retained: Scriptures, the Sacraments of Baptism, the Holy Eucharist and the Priesthood. But these cannot be understood nor meaningfully accepted, unless against the background of the
Old Testament myths, symbols, the history and culture of the Jews. If our consideration is correct, then it is wrong to think that Christianity is purely a sadhana dharma, bereft of any of the samaj-aspect.

S. holds (b) because, he thinks that what is essential in being a Hindu is to be bound by samaj dharma, i.e. rules regarding diet, ritual purity and various forms of social behaviour, and not following any specific sadhana dharma, any specific way of salvation. No doubt, for a Hindu, his dharma (religion) is closely related with his samaj dharma (duties to society) in the sense that he is obliged to observe certain rules pertaining to various forms of social behaviour such as diet, ritual purity etc. But he definitely goes beyond the mere samaj dharma because, firstly his observance of his samaj dharma touches his personal purification as well, enabling him to get at the 'Attainment', 'Realization', or the ultimate goal of life. Secondly his samaj dharma is never motivated by the religious considerations regarding the attitude to the laws of the samaj only. Hence it will be wrong to think that Hinduism is purely a samaj dharma bereft of sadhana aspect.

Not that all this is unknown to S. In fact he shows a recognition of all these considerations, as he has carefully worded his characterisation of Hinduism as "primarily samaj
When he says that Hinduism is primarily a *samaj dharma* he implies thereby that it has also the *sadhana*-aspect. Likewise when he says that Christianity is essentially *sadhana dharma*, he does imply thereby that it has also the *samaj*-aspect. Nevertheless, he does not want to give full weight to these implications. Rather he even wants to positively ignore them, and emphasize only the *samaj*-aspect in Hinduism and the *sadhana*-aspect in Christianity. This is clear from the fact that he is keen on arguing that the term 'religion' is used in both the cases not with the same sense, and concluding that they are different types of religions, standing on different planes.

Despite his unreadiness to deny the *sadhana*-aspect in Hinduism, and the *samaj*-aspect in Christianity, if he is keen on designating the one as *samaj dharma* and the other as *sadhana dharma*, this gives us a clue to understand the real intention: He seems to be interested really in providing greater possibilities of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. That is, as both are on different planes, as one is really religious, and the other is merely social, introducing the one in the context of the other will not only not imply any violence to it, but rather it might prove necessary, relevant and complementary to the other.
If this is really the intention of Fr. S., it is objectionable even from the point of view of Christian theology of religions today. S's attempt would be nothing less than a reformulation of the former approach of some Christians who gave a narrow interpretation of the formula: "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus", (outside the Church there is no salvation). A very narrow interpretation of this formula has been denounced by the Church itself. It is no more considered a valid approach to view Christianity alone as 'the revealed religion', 'the citadel of salvation', 'the sole embodiment of the Divine' and all other religions as 'merely natural', 'mere searches of the Divine' 'merely natural attainments' and so on. But what is implied by S's understanding of religions will go precisely against this modern approach. Again today's Christian theology, corroborated with the teachings of the Church, clearly acknowledges that every great religion is indeed a supernatural means of salvation, and that members of those religions will be saved, not in spite of their religion, but thanks to their religion. In this context, then, to understand the two religions in the way as S. does, seems not only outmoded, but also irrelevant.

Further, S's understanding of religions is to misread the very nature of religion. To be religious and to be social are not two things which can be done at different times or by
different people separately. One can be really religious only in the social context; and one can be truly social only in view of his religious goal. To put it in the terms of S's distinction, sadhana dharma and samaj dharma are not two separate things one can do at different times nor can different people do either of them separately. One can adopt a sadhana dharma only in the context of his samaj dharma. And one can observe his samaj dharma only in the context of sadhana dharma. An adherence to a mere sadhana dharma without the samaj dharma will be escapism; and the observance of samaj dharma without the sadhana aspect will be merely formalism. Hence any religion worth the name will have both the aspects of sadhana as well as samaj. To understand a religion in terms of either of them separately is to do violence to the very nature of religion. This is precisely what S. is doing in his attempt to understand the two religions in terms of sadhana dharma and samaj dharma separately.

S. may not object to the basic considerations about the nature of religion, we have shown above. And yet he might argue in favour of conversion to Christianity in the following way: "Being a Hindu, any way, does not depend upon holding any specific creed or practising a definite form of worship. He is rather free to choose any marga he likes. So, even remaining in the Hindu framework, it is possible for a Hindu to adopt the Christian marga, or way of
salvation." However, such an argument has a flaw both in its assumption and content, which will be clear from the following considerations.

The basic assumption of such an argument is to think that a Hindu is at a disadvantage because he does not have a definite set of beliefs or rituals whereas a Christian is at an advantage because it is all clearly prescribed to him. It is true that specification of a belief or a ritual as a definite sadhana of salvation may prove beneficial. But it is also possible that specifying a doctrine may end up in dogmatism, and specifying the ritual may end up in ritualism. Moreover, it is not clear either that a Hindu does not have a specified sadhana of salvation. He may not have all the details of his belief or worship prescribed in a codified way, as a Christian has. But the kind of sadhana he has to adopt is definitely prescribed to him. There is a broad framework of his belief handed over to him from generation to generation, and it is left to the individuals to work out the details. As a result there has been an authentic and original evolution of religion in India. If, in fact, Hinduism has been able to survive all the onslaughts from both without and within, the main reason may be that it has been evolving in the lives of the people, rather than remaining in mere prescriptions or specifications of dogmas and so on. It is with this sort of freedom that the kind of belief or worship
is prescribed to him. So it is incorrect to think that he
does not have any sadhana prescribed to him.

It is again a mistake to think, as S. does, that
because Hinduism allows a certain flexibility with regard to
the choice of specific sadhanas and allows its members to
choose the sadhana that appeals to them, anything can be
introduced into it. Certainly Hinduism allows certain
permutation and combinations. But it is always within its
broad framework. Whatever, therefore, does not fit into that
framework or anything that destroys the Hindu framework cannot
be introduced into it, with any meaningfulness. So, if
Christianity, as a sadhana, is to be introduced into Hindu
framework, it cannot be done simply by a decision of the
converts, that they will continue as Hindus culturally and
socially — as S. seems to suggest.\footnote{37}

The real question is whether Christianity will be
compatible with the pluralistic outlook of Hinduism. Certain
amount of exclusivistic attitude has been associated with
Christianity rightly or wrongly. Whether it was due to the
very nature of the Christian Faith that it had to be exclusivistic or only to historical and other factors, is debatable.
But it is a fact that Christianity has been associated with
certain amount of exclusivism. Whereas Hinduism is known for
a pluralistic outlook. Now, whether it is possible for
Christianity to be introduced into the Hindu framework will depend on how we understand the 'exclusiveness' of Christianity. It would be presumptuous to suggest that Christianity should shed its exclusiveness in order to be in tune with Hindu framework. After all, there might be something more to its exclusiveness than is apparent. All we might say is that we might be able to understand it in a different way, and re-interpret it in a way which would allow a pluralistic outlook towards other religions. It is only then it would not clash with the Hindu framework. But until that understanding is arrived at one may not try for an easy accommodation for these different religions with each other. But this is what is being done by S. by picking and choosing the most convenient theory about religions, characterising one as sadhana dharma and the other as samej dharma.

To sum up, (a) we can distinguish between 'religion' and 'community' in such a way that this explains the possibility of inculturation. Inculturation here implies the accommodatibility or adaptability of the converts with the parent community in every respect — say social, civil, cultural, political etc. — without at the same time abandoning the new religious commitment the converts are supposed to have made at the time of their conversion. No doubt this sort of inculturation will not merely be restricted to the communitarian aspect of their lives but also will have its repercussions.
for their religious aspect, or the faith-content. However, that does not mean that every step taken to accommodate with the parent community is a step towards the parent religion. Therefore one might say that inculturation, within limits, does not necessarily imply abandonment of the new religion, the converts have chosen to adopt. Thus the possibility of inculturation can be explained with reference to the distinction between 'religion' and 'community'.

(b) This distinction, however, is applicable only to the realm of thought and not to the realm of reality. That is, 'community' and 'religion' can be distinguished in thought, and they cannot remain separable in reality. But the mistake committed by S. is to distinguish between them in such a way as to imply their separability. That is why he is able to characterize Christianity primarily as sadhana dharma (a religion which is concerned with salvation of man) and Hinduism as a samaj dharma (religion concerned with social behaviour of man). But this he does for the purpose of justifying conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. And he argues also that these conversions need not really give rise to the problems that they usually generate, or alleged to generate.

Whether the purpose S. has in his mind is justifiable or not, and whether the understanding of the two religions
S. gives is right or not, can be answered only if we go into the question of the fundamental presuppositions of the two religions themselves about religions. This we propose to do in the following chapter.