CHAPTER 7. APPLICATIONS TO THE
THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION

One of the primary goals of this research is to determine whether the result of the preliminary research provides a basis for an increased understanding of some of the factors present in the theology and practice of conversion.

The preliminary research, which dealt with factors of Christian conversion in the New Testament, was described in earlier chapters. Thereafter, an interpretation of Christian conversion and the New Testament sought to lay the foundation for a movement from the particular to the contemporary normative application envisaged in the above-mentioned goal of this thesis.

The limitations of this study do not allow for a detailed discussion of either the theology or the practice of conversion. The aim is rather to note and comment on issues which have surfaced during the research, which provide additional access to an understanding of the theology and practice of conversion. These issues are presented in this and the next chapter, not as certain pronouncements, but as possible normative applications drawn from this investigation’s particular research.

Christian theology works within an inescapable theological circle that begins with a concrete commitment to the Christian message in its “unrepeatable uniqueness.”¹ It proceeds in a circular movement. The aim is that of a theological self-interpretation of the Christian message and the church. The new insight gained in this movement of

¹ Tillich, p.12.
thought are deemed to have been possible only because they were present, albeit obliquely and undefined, from the beginning.\footnote{Tillich, pp.11-14.}

Consequently, this study works with the assumption of God’s activity behind and within any phenomenological perception of Christian conversion. God is here not conceived as an additional factor which combines together with a varying number of human factors to bring about Christian conversion. As suggested earlier, God’s presence in an immediate and ultimate sense permeates all human factors involved in the conversion process.

Noted hereunder are a number of interrelated aspects of conversion drawn from discussion in the previous chapters which bear on the general topic of the theology of conversion. Conversion is accordingly viewed as a God-mediated multi-factorable phenomenon which seeks, in part, to satisfy an inherent or newfound religious quest. When viewed from the human standpoint, there are three pre-requisites to Christian conversion; varying human factors, a knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs and a faith commitment to Christ.

7.1. **FOUR THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONVERSION**

7.1.1. **Conversion: As God-Induced Change**

The word ‘conversion’ implies a change which accompanies the ‘turning from’ and ‘turning to’ of conversion. In Christian conversion change is present in all that the ‘turn to’ Christ demands. As noted, the turn to Christ is in the New Testament is in
fact a series of ‘turnings’; a process in which there is an increasingly deeper commitment to Christ with its associated changes. Therefore, the theology of Christian theology of conversion is a theology of change. It is reflection on God-induced changes associated with Christian conversion.

Marked changes were seen to be present in the New Testament contexts of conversion. New Testament references to conversion acknowledge God’s gracious actions in bringing about these changes.

7.1.2. Conversion: As Satisfaction of the Religious Quest

It is noted that one of the primary factors present in New Testament references to conversion was the religious quest.

Although applied only to religious conversion generally and arrived at from a different premise, this suggested religious quest resembles, to some degree, Tillich’s “quest for the new being.” Tillich claims that “the quest for the new being is universal because the human predicament and its ambiguous conquest are universal.”

Given the existence of the religious quest as a possibility in contexts of conversion in the New Testament, conversion may be said to be, in part, an attempt at satisfaction.

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588 Tillich, pp.91-102.
589 Tillich, p.100.
of such quest. It is a response to an awakened or newfound religious consciousness\textsuperscript{590} which, as this study suggests, presupposes directly or indirectly the felt existence of some ‘other worldly’ transcendental process that impinges upon and/or is within, the natural perceptible world.

In Christian conversion satisfaction of the religious quest is such that it can be said to give,

meaning to people in all stages of life, endurance to resist oppression and assurance that even death has no final power over human life because God in Christ has already taken our life with him, a life that is ‘hidden with Christ in God’. (Colossians 3:3).\textsuperscript{591}

If, as this study assumes, God is taken to be the ultimate cause behind and within a phenomenological perception of Christian conversion, then the religious quest is ultimately God-animated. There is a divinely given awareness of God’s presence at work as found in Romans 1:19-20 and Romans 2:14-15:

\begin{quote}
19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
14 Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{590} for example, Oshun and Parratt both assumes the existence and importance of the religious consciousness in their accounts of conversion/religious change in Ethiopia, the Continent of Africa generally and Yoruba Society, respectively.


One of the ways in which mankind responds to the Divine summons is through what Sharp describes as “man’s incredibly tenacious desire to worship.”\footnote{Sharpe, Eric J., \textit{Faith Meets Faith}, (London: SCM Press, 1973), p.20.} Greely asserts that “the basic human religious needs and the basic religious functions have not changed very notably since the Great Ice Age.”\footnote{Greeley andrew M., \textit{The Persistence of Religion}, (London: SCM Press, 1973), p.1.} Two of the five human needs mentioned by Greeley which religion seeks to meet, are directly related to the religious quest, therefore, “a meaning system which enables him to cope with the question of the ultimate” and “a channel for coming into intimate contact with the powers that are real.”\footnote{Greeley, p.16, 55-83, 151-170.} According to Greeley, these needs are inherent in the human condition.\footnote{Greeley, p.16.}

Although Greeley’s above weighty claims concerning the unchanging and inherent nature of mankind’s basic human need may, as he implies, be held in question, his research points to the possible presence of the religious quest among people to a greater degree than is often assumed. It directly supports the claim that religious conversion is an attempt at satisfaction of such a quest.
7.1.3. Conversion: As a Multi-Factorable Phenomenon

The conversion experience described by Duggan as being “like a many-faceted gem.”\textsuperscript{597} It can be looked at from a variety of angles. The resultant array of meanings that come under the general heading of ‘conversion’ can be so broad; even in a context that relates to religion; as to necessitate division into sub-categories such as conceptual, intellectual, material, moral, religious, spiritual and Christian conversion. It is interesting to observe that Doran, whose work on conversion was motivated by his study of Lonergan’s writings, felt it necessary to add a fourth dimension; “Psychic conversion;”\textsuperscript{598} to Lonergan’s three dimension of conversion; religious, moral and intellectual.\textsuperscript{599}

This study has chosen to discuss conversion under three headings; religious conversion, Christian conversion and conversion as the acceptance of a new religious affiliation. Differentiation does not necessarily imply that the one category of conversion is not related to or even contained in, another. Example, Christian conversion in this study can include the concepts of religious conversion and the conversion as the acceptance of a new religious affiliation. It is simply a recognition of the many ways in which the conversion may be viewed and indirectly points to conversion as a multi-factorable phenomenon.

Each separate perspective from which religious conversion is seen and analyzed adds to an understanding of the many-sided nature of conversion. The temptation is to move toward an academic imperialism which claims jurisdiction over the subject of conversion and acknowledges only that which comes within one’s own area of expertise. Even if this temptation is avoided there is perhaps a certain inevitability for each discipline to highlight as being of major importance that factor which lies within its own particular sphere of interest and expertise; example, sociology may give emphasis to social factors, psychology to processes of the mind, asserts the essential importance of viewing Christian conversion from both the Divine and human perspectives without the reduction of one to the other.

7.1.4. Conversion: As a Mediated Phenomenon

God’s approach was indirect; mediated through human factors. As noted, there was little, if anything, in the phenomena of religious change to suggest an unmediated approach to Christian converts by God. The phenomena as a whole pointed towards the vital and essential place of human factors in bringing about conversion and a change of religion.

The above observation bears an important implication for any consideration of the theology of conversion. Conversion, as noted, may be viewed as God-induced

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change. The New Testament contexts of conversion suggest that this change is mediated in and through the human situation. God was active in and through the set of factors appropriate to a particular group or individual and in giving them compelling force.

The claimed mediatory presence of God, in the context of Christian conversion in the New Testament, suggests that this form of approach by God may be normative for other contexts of Christian conversion. Therefore, although on the one hand theology may resist attempts to reduce conversion to solely environmental and natural causes, it should, on the other hand, give due acknowledgement to these causes. Failure to do so leads to a truncated theology of conversion, as conversion is reduced to just one dimension of its reality.

If God is mediately present in the factors that lead to Christian conversion, the question may be raised as to the possibility of God’s presence in human factors that lead to non-Christian conversion or even where conversion does not take place. This question is particularly pertinent for any Christian who lives in a country where the vast majority of the population is not Christian.

The Gospel explicitly declares God’s concern for the whole world. Therefore, His active presence, expressive of His love and salvific will for His whole creation, may be assumed. “He has not left himself without witness at any time or place. The Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected.”

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In what way God is present and to what degree, is a question that defies an easy answer, as the foregoing World Council of Churches Ecumenical Affirmation implies.

Attempts to identify an unknown\textsuperscript{604}/cosmic\textsuperscript{605} Christ in non-Christian religions such as Hinduism or to posit an anonymous faith or an anonymous Christian,\textsuperscript{606} issue from a desire to do justice to both the concept of God’s concern for and activity in, the world implied in the Gospel. It also emanates from a recognition that “there is an astonishing vivacity and depth of God-experience in other religions, such as Hinduism.”\textsuperscript{607} Expressing this conviction Devanandan asserts, “it is difficult to hold that all non-Christian faith is purely a human quest for God and that in all such ‘seeking’ there is no ‘finding’ or ‘being found’.”\textsuperscript{608}

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\item \textsuperscript{604} Panikkar, R., \textit{The Unknown Christ of Hinduism}, (London: Longman & Todd, 1964).
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7.2. BASIC CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

7.2.1. Essential Relationship Between Beliefs and Christian Conversion

In the previous chapters, this study has made the four under-mentioned assertions concerning the relationship between conceptual knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs and Christian Conversion in the New Testament:

(i) The thesis hypothesis is substantially correct; therefore, knowledge of the Basic Christian Beliefs is a significant factor within the phenomenon of Christian conversion in the New Testament.

(ii) This knowledge precedes conversion.

(iii) This knowledge is part of the initial turn of conversion.

(iv) This knowledge bears on and affects the resultant reorientation of life to Christ.

The above four claims give knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs an essential status in Christian conversion. Consequently, the related claim is made that, when viewed from the standpoint of associated conspicuous changes, Christian conversion in the New Testament has not, in most instances, taken place apart from a prior acquired knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, Christian conversion, from a human perspective, has three different prerequisites and can be expressed as follows:
The elevation of Basic Christian Beliefs to the status of the essential in Christian conversion may be held in question on at least the following two grounds:

(a) It tends to give priority to conceptual knowledge over other important factors in conversion, therefore, societal, caste, etc.

In response to this possible objection, it should be noted that this study is not asserting the priority in importance, in all instances, of knowledge over other factors in Christian conversion or religious experience generally. This may well be the case as some suggest.\textsuperscript{609} However, the priority emphasised here is an essential significance in time to the initial turn of conversion, therefore, knowledge prior to the first turn of conversion.

(b) Other factors are often seem to be more prominent in religious conversion than knowledge, therefore, predisposing conditions and situatitonal contingencies such as effective bonding.\textsuperscript{610}

In answer, even where other factors are suggested as being more important, there is often an implicit or explicit recognition of the essential place of knowledge in the process of conversion. Lofland makes the following observation concerning conversation to the religious group that he labels as the “D.PS.” The converts “were


dogged, that is, by a delemma; they had to tell their beliefs in order to make converts, but the more they told the less likely was conversion.611

Some writers were in no doubt as to the priority in time of knowledge before religious experience. O’Collins claims that “there is no experience truly prior to knowledge.”612 Proudfoot suggests that:

Affective or emotional experiences assume particular beliefs and judgements about the world and that a plausible claim can be made that these cognitive aspects of experience are more fundamental than are attitudes and emotions.613

The assertion is not being made here that knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs is sufficient of itself to lead to conversion. However, the claim is made that where knowledge of Basic Christian Belief is absent or minimal prior to the initial turn of Christian conversion, the resultant ‘Christian life’ will, in most instances, fail to reflect a change in perspective and behavior. There is a ‘decision’, albeit well intentioned, rather than Christian conversion. The emphasis on a quick decision, apart from an in-depth exposure to Basic Christian Beliefs, may well be the major reason for the undermentioned observation:

A study of the Institute for American Church Growth published in 1978 pointed out that even though Campus Crusade for Christ registered hundreds of thousands of ‘decisions’, only 3% of the persons responding were ever incorporated into a local congregation.614

Conversely, it is significant to note that most converts to Catholicism in the United States of America, interviewed by Hoge, received religious training as children or

had been active in other churches. Therefore, prior to conversion converts had some knowledge of the New Testament testimony of Jesus Christ.

7.2.2. A Theological Interpretation of the Relationship

Descriptions of the theological circle, within which Christian theology works, generally highlight the importance of an individual’s existential choice or commitment. As a consequence, belief can be viewed not only as one of the conditions for understanding but, consciously or unconsciously, as the only condition.

When applied to the phenomenon of Christian conversion, the above position implies that faith is the only prerequisite for Christian conversion. This investigation stands in opposition to any such assertion on two grounds. The first is that in the New Testament the condition of faith required for Christian conversion is not devoid of knowledge; it is not an uninformed faith. Second, the phenomena of Christian conversions in New Testament have identified two additional prerequisites of Christian conversion, viz., varying human factors and a knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs.

From a human standpoint, all three factors combine to bring about Christian conversion. Any single factor, apart from the other two, is insufficient. Knowledge of

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615 “This findings agrees with all earlier research showing that most new members of Christian churches already posses a Christian world view.”

616 Example, “Religious reasoning is some kind of circular reasoning; by means of a certain choice, you have accepted certain ideas or premises and only for those who have accepted the same ideas will the reasoning that follows be convincing.”
Basic Christian Beliefs apart from faith is foolishness.\textsuperscript{617} Because the subject of Basic Christian Beliefs is God’s action in and through Christ, the truth to which the said knowledge points transcends its verbal expression. Nevertheless, faith requires such knowledge for Christian conversion to take place. Knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs gives potential converts to Christianity an understanding of both the salvation to be received and the deliverer involved. It allows faith to be born,\textsuperscript{618} and an informed existential commitment made to Christ. Knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs is, as a consequence, the essential platform from which faith, in Christian conversion, takes its leap of obedience and surrender.

Although, faith goes beyond objective knowledge, it is related to and arises from, such knowledge. In Christian conversion the movement is from a conceptual knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs to a ‘personal’ knowledge mediated through faith of the trans-historical Christ-event; an identification with Christ in his death, resurrection and exaltation. Conceptual knowledge of Basic Christian Beliefs provides an orientation toward God’s action in and through Christ. It is this knowledge-based orientation which is a prerequisite to faith. Kitagawa makes similar observation with regard to religious knowledge generally and its relation to faith:

\begin{quote}
1 Corinthians 1:20-25, “20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”
\end{quote} 

\begin{quote}
Romans 10:17, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”
\end{quote}
“Religious knowledge gives an understanding of the nature of existence in relation to the sacred source of reality, whereby one is able to chart the course of one’s life.”

From a divine standpoint, God is present in all three essentials of Christian conversion. God is the one who brings together a set of human factors which are appropriate to a particular group of individual. He empowers proclamation of the Gospel in a way that it comes to the hearer with compelling force. He bestowes the gift of faith through which a group or individual responds to the Gospel. In addition, he brings about the transformation to which the turn of conversion looks. Hence, from start to finish, Christian conversion is a God-animated process.

If it is accepted, as has been claimed, that God approaches men and women mediatelty in Christian conversion, it is plausible to suggest that the mind is not by-passed in such a process.

Negatively, to deny the involvement of the mind in God’s approach raises a number of important issues which weigh against such a proposition. First, it implies that God requires a person to simply believe without any idea of the one making such a demand. It becomes belief in an object about whom nothing is known. Second, it pays scant respect to truth which Christianity purports to reveal. Circumvention of the mind suggests a fear of investigation and scrutiny which is contrary to the nature of truth. Third, it fails to take serious recognition of the fact that Christian conversion, in the New Testament phenomena of conversions, is a fundamental and vital human decision which does not by-pass the mind.

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Positively, an involvement of the mind by God in the process of conversion not only overcomes the foregoing obstacles posed by non-involvement, but also points to a natural connection between Basic Christian Beliefs and the claimed underlying human religious quest. The Christian message interprets life in a way that is held to be meaningful to the one who ultimately becomes a Christian convert. It is an answer to the inner restless desire for a means of contact with ultimate reality, however conceived; whether God or other perceived deities. Lastly, acceptance of the involvement by God of the mind in the conversion process accounts more easily for the asserted relationship between the content of the proclaimed message prior to Christian conversion and the resultant reorientation of life to Christ. The mind is thus seen to be present in both aspects of conversion. It is a recipient of the message prior to conversion and, in part, determines behavioural changes that reflect the new accepted perspective.

The above suggested mediatory approach of God in Christian conversion implies that the process may be duplicated by people and/or ‘powers’, other than God, therefore, a use of the same three above mentioned human factors in order to bring about ‘conversion’ to an alternative perspective. As a consequence, from a human standpoint the line between manipulation and genuine Christian conversion, in terms of procedure, is unclear. The one may resemble the other in certain aspects. However, the difference between manipulation and Christian conversion is patently obvious when viewed from the perspective of the fruits of a claimed conversion. Some of the observable marks mentioned in this study which denotes Christian

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conversion are peace, freedom, church involvement, loyalty to Christ, love, opposition to evil and wholeness; a dynamic ‘becoming’ in Christ.