

Conversion

When I hear the word “conversion” nowadays, the first thing that comes to mind is currency conversion – US dollars or British pounds to Canadian dollars, or some similar calculation. You’d think that for someone in church ministry, the religious meaning of that word might occur to me first, but it doesn’t.

Religious conversion just isn’t at the top of my mind. I think that’s because the kind of conversion that today’s religious people talk about – and the kind that has been enacted in Christian circles for centuries – is something I find uncomfortable, even distasteful.

The old notion of “Christianizing the world” has been used by various elements of the church, including its highest leadership, to perpetrate untold misery, dehumanization, violence, personal affront and cultural genocide down through the years, and is even continuing today in some aspects of modern evangelism. I don’t need to detail all of this. Many of you will know enough about Christian history to have examples in mind of what I’m referring to here. Close to home in time and place is our own church history of residential schools that attempted to Christianize and assimilate indigenous children away from their own culture and religion toward what our forebears thought were more socially and religiously orthodox ways.

The modern manifestations of religious conversion are both communal and individual. The communal versions try to instill in a group, or a community, or a whole people, a (usually specific and not general) “Christian” way and understanding of faith in place of whatever current religious ways and understandings are in place. Examples in and through some churches or organizations are various forms of shoebox programs, like Samaritan’s Purse’s “Operation Christmas Child”, where personal items and often school supplies are packaged in individual parcels for children or sometimes families, always including pamphlets or other materials promoting that church’s or organization’s particular brand of Christianity.

The personal form of religious conversation today involves encouraging or persuading individuals to make a particular statement or say a particular creed in order to show how they have formed a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” or something similar. This is seen as that person converting from a non-Christian way of life to a Christian way of being along with seeing themselves in a brand new religious position.

Both these personal and communal versions of conversion I find offensive and patronizing, as well as religiously dishonest, pretending that a specific viewpoint and understanding of Christianity is the only legitimate one. There is no consideration of the current spirituality of the person or group. That is simply dismissed as unworthy. What I also find offensive about what I’ve outlined above is the way conversion practices are used to try to *impose* a certain way of thinking, rather than to *invite* consideration of an expanded understanding of oneself and the way the cosmos works.

Still, conversion can have positive connotations. After all, isn’t growing in faith like a conversion from where one is, to where one might be? Isn’t Christian spiritual development like a process of converting oneself from one worldview to an expanded one that encompasses more of what one considers to be the ways of Jesus, or the heart of God? If conversion is seen as an ongoing process of personal spiritual and religious understanding, a process that is under the control of the person themselves, then it can be a positive thing.

So just like the word “evangelical” is uncomfortable for me, yet still useful, maybe I need to get over my distaste for the word “conversion”, and start using it in its positive sense instead of just not using it at all. Maybe that’s part of my own ongoing conversion of faith and faith language.