

**“All Things to All People”?:
Mission, Conversion and Providence in a Global Era**

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[Introduction](#)

[Some Dynamics of Conversion](#)

[Key Effects of the Secondary Conversion](#)

[Christian Missions and a Theology of Providence](#)

[What Then Shall We Do?](#)

[Vocation, Covenant, and Wisdom for the In-between Times](#)

[Endnotes](#)

Introduction

The way that missions work, as these essays seem to illustrate, is always multifaceted with polydimensional dynamics and unpredictable consequences. But its objective is always the same: conversion – a deeply controversial idea in many contexts. Both the motivations and the results are related to the very complex processes of the conversion of persons, the planting of new kinds institutions, the encounter, clash or dialogue about worldviews and the human condition, the ethical reformation of the psycho-social “powers” that grasp the loyalties of the soul, the struggles for truth and justice, and the formation of a conviction-based ethos that is ever the core of civilization. True conversion may only be accomplished by divine intervention, as accepted by the new believer; but those who see themselves as proximate agents of that divine reality usually sense that they are commissioned to draw attention to the need for, possibility of, and benefits from a change.

Although missions are often thought of in the religious sense, the missionary is, in many respects, very like the healer, the reformer, the organizer of a movement, even the revolutionary, in that basic changes are sought, and the changes advocated come partly by human intention, partly by unintended transformations brought about by basic alterations of the mind, will, and heart, and partly by the consequent reorganization of the “powers” that, over time, re-order the habits of life, the host society and its culture. Such changes are spoken of, in Biblical terms, as *gūr* (“to draw near”) in Hebrew and as *epistrephō* (“to return or turn back”) or a *metanoia* (“a change of ‘mentality’”), on the part of a *prosēlytos* (“one who has come to a new place”) in Greek, all of which were usually translated into the Latin as *conversio* (“a turning back or turning over”). The English word “convert,” thus, may imply an approach to something

anticipated, a recovery of something left behind, a change of mind, or a turn to something new, and various missions may seek any or all of these. The various possible meanings are illustrated by one or another of the papers in this collection.

Some Dynamics of Conversion

The whole idea of conversion is usually thought of as a highly individual phenomenon, although multiple agents are usually involved. Yet, indeed, there is no substitute for the conversion of the person. Without it, no religion or transformational project will get rooted, survive or thrive without convicted persons. Even those religions or social movements that resist the notion of “proselytism” also observe rituals of transition or initiation, often speaking of the “twice born,” thereby seeking to induce an awareness of matters that are believed to alter the consciousness and thus the life-orientation of the individual. Conversion to a new basic life-orientation and social fabric is thus always a controversial matter, but is probably unavoidable in human history, for no life-orientation or social fabric has yet been discovered or invented or so widely shared that it satisfies all persons in all ways. Moreover, we cannot number the variety of felt needs and socio-psychological promptings that bring a person to accept a new faith, or even to renew a commitment to the one in which the person is nurtured, for the combination of promptings is experienced as particular and unique by each person. Still, it is not infrequent that a new or renewed believer confesses that a gift, an insight, a new perspective has been received – one that is more intellectually coherent, more ethically compelling, more emotionally satisfying and more socially just and advantageous than what was known before. To grasp the prospects for mission in pluralistic, globalizing societies, it is important to attempt to understand how change takes place in human historical existence. Such an inquiry will lead us toward a constructive view of missions today.

It could very well be the case that the capacity for conversion and the inclination to undertake a mission is one of the most distinctive marks of what it means to be human. We may be, as creatures, largely driven by the interaction of our genetic makeup, our medical history, and the social groups into which we are born, as these interact with the environmental options, ecological and cultural, to which we are exposed. And we may have instincts to act in particular ways and can be trained to respond to certain stimuli. In this, we are little different than the beasts of the earth. But in conversion, persons are inspired to step beyond the confines of these factors of existence. People discover a new objective spiritual reality to which they become related. They find that genetics is not destiny, that healing can take place, that previous “others” become brothers and sisters, and that there is within themselves a new reason for living. They find a new ability to become agents in their own lives beyond instinct and habituated responses, and a deepened, widened capacity for love. Together these bring a dramatic sense of freedom along with an awareness of the splendor that is in, behind, and beyond the mere factuality of the world – even in the midst of senseless tragedy, alienation, oppression, and ugliness. All the ordinary “powers” of the world (what the New Testament names as “principalities”, “thrones”, and “dominions,” or as “spirits” and “daemons”) are subordinated to a greater reality.

However, it is also true that persons are almost never converted in isolation. Not only is it the usual case that some person (the missionary, the reformer, etc.) discusses, preaches, teaches or writes something that attracts the mind, will, or affections of another, but the one attracted is

often linked by a thousand bonds to others. Some persons who are drawn to convert by these means are “representative persons” – the head of a village, clan, caste, or kingdom, or even a gifted youth, spouse, friend, or a “bad actor” who becomes a “transformed person.” They become the agents who leads other members of the family or group into the new ways of thinking and living. When such a leader is converted, often the entire community whose identity these persons represent also is converted. The reasons for their conversion may well be that they are exposed to a better “metaphysical-moral vision” of reality than the one they knew, but it may also be a quite practical matter: they discover a higher standard of justice than the one in operation, they find themselves healed of some physical, moral, or social disability, or they sense an option for a better life for the people for whom they are responsible.^[1] After a conversion, other individual persons in the group are gradually converted in the more personal sense. Through nurture, habit, practice, catechesis, and socialization, individuals are initiated into the faith, usually bringing much of their cultural background, previous communal beliefs and social practices with them. More often than not, they tend to interpret the new faith in the old terms – and to reinterpret the old traditions in new terms. In short, they tend to “baptize” many of the existing patterns of life and their presuppositions, thereby generating a fresh synthesis of new faith and old ways. This synthesis must be tested and revised over the years, with the old selectively approved and the new given a fresh inculturated expression, even if the new religion is, in principle, “exclusionary.”

When persons are converted, it often involves a decline in exclusive loyalty to their “home” tradition and a turn to a “trans-local” metaphysical-moral and social frame of reference. A generation ago, Robin Horton identified a difference between a “microcosmic” frame of reference – one focused on the spirits of the ancestors, of a geographical territory, or of visible natural phenomena – and a “macrocosmic” one – one which has an account of the universe and the supreme divine power(s) that order the whole of existence, as do the great world religions. He argues that the primal religions are largely microcosmic but often have a thin macrocosmic dimension that is invigorated and redefined by contact with one or another of the world religions. The new framework provides a new range of possibilities for understanding and new reference points for one’s personal and social self-identity.^[2] The motivations for this kind of conversion may be triggered by a dramatic healing of some wound in their lives or because of a growing suspicion of or alienation from their previous society or its leaders – parental, religious, cultural, economic, or political – when they encounter a more complex civilization. Something in the way life is lived and legitimated simply does not make sense anymore, or does not provide for physical, economic, social or spiritual opportunity or well-being in the way that the alternative does. Integrity requires a shift, and an act of freedom – in fact, quite possibly the most important freedom possible to humans.

The consciousness that a decision can be made, that we humans can “become what we are not” (as Paul said), or cope with a major disruption in our accepted meaning system, or respond to an act of grace toward us that alters our relationship to earthly commonality and divine reality, entails an experience of freedom that is more formative of identity than any other life experience.^[3] No longer are we victims of the pre-given “powers,” the “principalities, thrones, authorities and dominions” of life. Personal conversion is a decisive opportunity by which humans may discover the possibility of transcendence over the material, social, cultural, and psycho-spiritual forces that define most of life for most people most of the time. To deny this

opportunity to others – or to force them to pretend to accept this change by a conquest that imposes a new religious order – is to deny the very humanity of the other. In conversion we and they can come to know a reality other than the given conditions of life in a way that allows us with them to transform the given conditions of existence.^[4]

In the midst of and, even more, after a conversion, however, the individual ordinarily does not remain a free, isolated, and autonomous person. The free convert feels a duty to convert other individuals, and together they inevitably seek to found a new community or to reform the old one by generating a sect, a cell, a fellowship, a school, or, as in the Christian case, the church – a community of commitment that shares the new macrocosmic vision and, indeed, a missiological movement. If this development does not happen, the experience quickly falls into the category of an odd psychic occurrence subject to psychiatric or socio-pathic analysis, and may become the source of cultic, tribal, class, or national idolatry. The high significance of the formation of a new, distinct institution in the society is that a new social fabric is woven that reconstitutes civil society itself. An increased structural pluralism is established in society, incarnating the prospects of a chosen community of conviction – a voluntary association that opens the door to a more complex social and personality structure. The prospect becomes that each person may be related to multiple kinds of institutions, now by choice, not by pre-given destiny. If the act of conversion is the first liberation, the exodus from the old station in life, the formation of a new kind of community, one related to others outside the traditional community, is the seed-bed of a reformation of the whole of society, the social incarnation of true pluralism and freedom. This is a second conversion, often an unintended one.

This does not mean that the past is utterly abandoned or repressed. People bring their pasts with them. In all known cases, aspects of the previous understandings of life and its meaning, and patterns of relationship and loyalty inevitably survive; but they are under standards and critical judgments that did not operate previously. In the new community, all aspects of the society and culture, and their presuppositions, become subject to redefinition and reconstruction. The founding and formation of a new community not only reflects the conversion of persons, but usually moves in one of three directions. One is to withdraw from the dominant society and to form an enclave of alternative piety and morality. We might call this the Qumran strategy, adopted in various ways in Christian history by monastic movements, communitarian sects, and sometimes by converted clans, tribes or castes who must defend themselves from persecution by a dominant religion. A second, which we may call the Philemon strategy, is to form an open and affirming attitude to other people on religious grounds within the given institutions of society, and thus to accept the ethnic, linguistic, class, gender-based, or caste sub-cultures as they are, leaving unchallenged the dominant political and economic fabric as a part of one's national cultural identity, but promoting a parallel set of relationships on other terms. These strategies do understand freedom by liberating exodus, but they do not grasp the mandate to reform society by new covenantal or disciplined formation.

The third, which we can call the Kingdom approach, sees in the principles and purposes of the newly adopted religion the resources to move toward the reconstruction of the whole society: political, economic, familial, and cultural. This approach to the immanence of the Kingdom (as expressed in the New Testament phrase, "The Kingdom of God is within you," or "among you") entails the presumption that the power of God is in fact already at work within and among the

persons and processes of social history, transforming them toward God's ends. Thus, one of the tasks of converted people is to discern where, in the midst of life, that power is at work, and to become agents of it so far as possible. In this context, traditional identity and many cultural patterns remain, for it is seen that God has also worked through them; but they become much less determinative for life and more of a background factor, with the recognition that they, like all existing institutions, are subject to reformation or transformation.

Of course, there is a peril in each option. The new community can become spiritually arrogant, a "saints' church" that recognizes no integrity outside. Or it can become a social club, full of fellowship within, but structurally indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. Or it can become a militantly aggressive society of reformers seeking to subject the world to its own view of life by coercion and legal control – a temptation found in Christian "crusaders," and in Islamic *jihadis*, Confucian "legalists," Hindu nationalists, Buddhist *ninjas*, and militant secular revolutionaries.^[5]

Key Effects of the Secondary Conversion

Whether driven by a communitarian conversion that initiates the transformation of individual identities, even if it preserves much of the traditional community's culture and social order, or individual conversion that seeks to convert other persons and to form new communities with different strategies toward the surrounding social and cultural heritage, the decisive changes are usually carried by minorities who alter the religious landscape. That is a decisive clue to social change. This clue implies that the governing metaphysical-moral vision of a civilization is the most powerful force operating in society over time, and that a minority able to generate a fresh, compelling metaphysical-moral vision, and incarnate it effectively in enduring institutions, is the most likely group to shape subsequent history. The powers of the common life are shaped by that vision. It becomes embodied in political orders that render the relative peace possible in human existence, legal authority that provides true glimpses of justice, family customs that bond the sexes and the generations into mutually caring and supportive relationships, economic institutions that are effectively productive and open to opportunity, and professional expertise (as in education, medicine, engineering, management, etc.). All of these depend at least in part on the legitimating power of that vision, and most people most of the time adapt to the social and cultural conditions in which they find themselves as defined by these powers. Only seldom do these powers and principalities become agents of change entirely on their own, and if they do, it is on a short-term basis, when some dramatic failure of the system is at hand.

For the most part, most people live by a basic assent to the reigning system of social life, which anthropologists usually call a "Culture" and sociologists call "Society" – in either case, a system of interacting beliefs, structures, and habituated practices governed by an "ethos" – a dynamic cluster of interlocking principles, purposes and values that become incarnated in the institutions of the common life into which we are socialized and that basically guide existence. This fact is often reinforced by a sense of relative powerlessness among the majority in the face of "the way things are," and by a relative unawareness of the indirect and quite powerful effects the influences of religious conversion and its institution-forming dynamics can have.^[6] Even if mass movements based in material interests protest against the effects of the reigning system and seek to mobilize communal or political dissent against it, their protest and dissent will be temporary

and either managed or crushed by the “legitimate” powers of society that represent the leading institutions of society the dominant religio-cultural values – *unless* the dissenters challenge the dominant vision and suggest better ways of life. As Robert Hefner has written, although “empires and economic orders have come and gone, the world religions have survived. They are...the longest lasting of civilization’s primary institutions.... [Yet] only a few religions have shown great success in propagating themselves over time and space.”^[7] Moreover, if these few religions do not simultaneously construct viable and enduring social institutions to sustain their spiritual-intellectual efforts, they will fail, and the advocates of the traditional ways (or some other, newer movement) will pick off the converts one by one, and little group by little group. Reflection on these matters makes one have greater admiration for missionaries than the post-colonialist views have allowed for a couple of generations. Those noble visionaries took on the task of spreading the good news of a great vision and building the socio-institutional bases whereby a new movement could become, as was said in the nineteenth century, “self-sustaining, self-propagating, and self-governing.” They generated a new regard for freedom of religion, the rights of conversion and the rights to assemble, organize, and publish freely.^[8]

When a basic conversion occurs and incarnates, however, surrounding peoples, and especially their religious leaders, will recognize that a new order is being formed – to which they must adjust, or against which they will react. They may resist the new movements by direct, violent action, or by petitioning political authority to use its power to stop the growth of these new “foreign bodies” in their sphere of influence; but focusing such attention on these new movements also brings about alteration of the dominant religion opposing the conversion. It is arguable, for example, that it was Christian missions in India that prompted new interpretations of the *Vedas* as “revealed,” and not simply the wisdom of the sages, and the *Gita* as a kind of “new testament,” and not simply a part of a classic epic. Moreover, Christian missions surely shaped the formation not only of the Arya Samaj, the Brahma Samaj, and the Ramakrishna Mission (and a host of “evangelical” guru-led international advocates of transcendental meditation and yoga – forms of Hindu counter-missionary efforts) – but of Hindu-based hospitals, colleges, presses, technical assistance, and welfare centers.

To note these developments, of course, challenges the secular, materialist theories of power and social change that have dominated many liberal and most radical interpretation of missions for some years. The resurgent power of religious movements modified by their encounter with Christian missions is now changing the patterns of life all over the world, and this fact forces us to think some matters through again.

In view of these factors, I want to argue that the interaction of personal conviction and institutional transformation is the most revolutionary action of human history. It forms, defines, and transforms civilizations, without violence and war, and indirectly shapes the social history of humanity more than any other set of forces. Further, it defines much of the individual identity of persons and the structure of communities in civil society. If this contention is valid, it will require a modification of the dominant interpretations of history and social life in contemporary thought, most of which claim that the most powerful forces in society are political, or economic, or cultural, and that these determine the nature, motivations, and history of religion and, thus, of missions. I think that the evidence is clear: we cannot grasp the sense of identity, the social or cultural dynamics or the present state of affairs in the tribal regions of the world without

attention to the communal conversions that are taking place under the impact of the great world religions. Nor can we understand historic China without reference to the Confucian-Taoist tradition as modified by Buddhism and now by the quasi-religion of Maoism and the growth of the “underground church,” or South Asia without reference to Hinduism as modified by both Islam and Christianity. These are the areas of the world where great “metaphysical-moral systems of thought” (which we often call “religions”) have already modified (and are still attempting to modify, by absorption) primal religious traditions, by seeking to integrate them into communitarian civilizations (Sinic or Indic or Semitic) and to resist renewed efforts at conversion by the “converting” religions (Buddhism, Islam and Christianity). Furthermore, we cannot grasp many cultures from Burma to Japan without reference to the converting power of Buddhism, or the Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia without reference to Islam, both modified by resurgent tribal traditions and a striking resistance to Christianity.^[9] Indeed, these may be greater challenges to Christianity than are the primal, Confucian or Hindu traditions, for Buddhism and Islam are also, like Christianity, “converting” religions which claim to have a framework for interpreting the whole of reality and believe that they must be extended over all the earth for the salvation of humanity.^[10]

Second, beyond the general effects that conversion has had historically in producing the great civilizations of the world, it is plausible to argue that the relationship of Christianity to Western civilization reveals certain promising features as well as certain fearful perils that can be overcome by new developments in our globalizing world. There may be ways to both preserve key elements of the classical tradition and to modulate them by new encounters with the great religio-cultural traditions of the world. Christianity has encountered great traditions in the past. One thinks particularly of the imperial traditions from Alexander to the Caesars that used ancient polytheist religions to consolidate their empire in the West, at about the same time as Ashok used Buddhism to legitimate, and expand, his rule; or the Chinese imperial traditions have used Confucianism in the East, and of the medieval period of priest-dominated hierarchical religion to stabilize feudal society in the West and guide the many princely states of the period, which had many parallels with the Hindu society of Manu’s day. During more recent missions history, Christianity has had its greatest expansions in tribal areas – as continues today.^[11]

The western story is best known, and thus can be briefly retold. In the early church, the tiny minority of Christians transformed the Mediterranean world and the Roman Empire, growing out of, selectively preserving, and substantively offering critique of the enormous and indispensable legacy of social justice from the tribal religion of Judaism, many aspects of the ancient mystery cults, and selective metaphysical and socio-political assumptions from the Greco-Roman philosophies. This combination gave the Church the powerful sense of its orthodoxy and catholicity that appears in the classic theologies of the early and medieval periods. These theologies in turn formed the “traditional” culture of the West and had certain parallels to the centralized imperial civilizations of East Asia and the regional, hierarchical civilizations of South Asia – except that the formation of the church in the West generated also a horizontal, and not only a vertical pluralism in society. In spite of various alliances and overlapping structures between church, state, and society, a new kind of differentiation was established. No aspect of Western European civilization – family life, arts, law, medicine, politics, education, and the ideals of morality – has been unaffected by this complex set of missiological developments.

These traditions eventually exercised influence, but were also reshaped, in Eastern Europe by their adoption and adaptation into the Slavic cultures. A similar process of influence and reshaping also occurred in Northern Europe and North America, carried by the Protestant minorities that protested many features of both the orthodoxy and catholicity that was claimed. These minorities protested primarily in the name of Biblical insights which they thought the prevailing orthodoxy and catholicity obscured, and also on behalf of an appreciation for the truth of many humanistic insights advanced by the Renaissance, which they thought Catholics repressed. Protestantism, which embraced these insights in various combinations, produced the Evangelical, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist and various Baptist traditions as they framed the basic patterns of modern Euro-American civilization, further diversifying the pluralism and challenging the imperialism of the Holy Roman Empire, the hierarchical authority of the church, and the elitism of the permanently stratified imperial societies it encountered. In substantive ways, key religious impulses and themes present in the New Testament church were developed by Catholicism, revised by Protestantism, and developed most rapidly in those periods when the focus fell on the conversion of persons and the formation of new institutions. The biblical themes, refined in controversy and by practical testing, transformed the inherited communal civilizations into a dynamic, modernizing culture committed to technology, democracy, human rights, urbanization, corporate capitalism, and the development of the professions.

This complex set of traditions not only modified earlier primal, imperial, hierarchical and royal patterns of life, but it also generated a dynamic civilization that could not but expand. This means that it also joined in expanding the influence of the West by colonialism, a highly ambiguous development. Ironically, it not only exploited weaker civilizations but transferred to them a desire for the fruits of this civilization: technology, democracy, human rights, urbanization, corporate capitalism, professional excellence and, eventually, aspects of a redefined family life and cuisines, clothing styles, musical styles, etc. What is ironic about these developments is that precisely these “powers, principalities, and authorities” also became key resources for overthrowing colonialism, often in alliance with nationalism and socialism.

One thing to which this brief survey of Catholic and Protestant Christian influences points is the fact that Christian expansion prompted the leaders of many colonized peoples to critically re-examine their own traditions – as the early Christians did Hebraic and Greco-Roman patterns of thought and life, and as the Reformation did to both previous Roman theologies and practices and the tribal traditions of the North European peoples. A chief dynamic in this aspect of the process is that people begin to critically investigate aspects of their own heritage and to find elements in it that have been neglected, submerged, or overlaid by other emphases. They would discover similarities between their indigenous tradition and the new religious orientation, and they would combine these in fresh ways that refined and expanded both the culture and the faith. When they raised a previously subordinate element of their own tradition into dominance, they could see it as evidence of the pre-conversion working of God’s providence in their own history. In this way, indigenous traditions would add to the historic development of doctrine. Thus, a “conversion of traditions” proceeds from the conversions of persons and peoples.

If such a dynamic is accurately identified, it helps us account for the fact that we can already see the emerging prospects of, for example, a Chinese Christianity deeply marked by Confucianism and an Indian Christianity deeply marked by Hinduism, not unlike “Italian Catholicism” or

“German Lutheranism” or “Dutch Calvinism” or “Russian Orthodoxy” of earlier ages. Each of these bears strong traces of the social practices and religious orientations that were present before conversion and that influenced what parts of the Gospel were most attractive. Whether this will happen as Christianity encounters Buddhism and Islam more deeply than it has yet done is more difficult, for there may be sharper and inevitable conflicts. The one is constitutionally atheistic and ascetic, although it has become attached to pious royal polities at least since king Ashok and became hierocratic in Tibet. The other is constitutionally monotheistic and political, although it has had a mystical and personalist dimensions at least since the Sufi movements, and it has become hierocratic in Iran. These are decisive issues for Christian missions and its theology of the world religions. Buddhism and Islam, and not only Christianity, have had their greatest missionary successes with primal traditions, which have been drawn into the more complex civilization-forming religions time and again. Indeed, the conflicts between Christianity and the other religions have often been played out among tribal peoples and oppressed peasant populations who follow primal traditions. The complex metaphysical pluralism and high ethical content of Confucian and Hindu traditions, however, are likely to be encountered as early Christianity did the Greek philosophical and Roman religious traditions: by selective borrowing and mutual critique that forced theological clarity about doctrine and polity. Obstacles to this process might arise if a resurgent China reasserts the superiority of loyalty to its historic imperial ontocracy and suspicion of “foreign” religion,^[12] or a nationalistic Hinduism with its metaphysical caste system closes off the possibility of conversion.^[13]

In the Greek and Roman cases, Christianity learned from these traditions and nevertheless transformed them. Is that likely to be the case in regard to Confucianism and Hinduism, and with Buddhism and Islam? Can this be an intention of Christian missions? And, if so, can we, should we, expect minority Christians to take this task upon themselves?

Christian Missions and a Theology of Providence

If the above account of the dynamics of conversion and the secondary effects of missions is accurate, we shall have to take the probable consequences of continuing the Christian efforts to engage in missions and to keep open the possibilities of conversion for as long as we can see into the future. Further, we shall have to clarify the direction in which we think God wants us to bend the religious and social fabric of the human future by our missions. We shall have to raise these questions for several unavoidable reasons. First, Christians cannot avoid being in mission. We believe that the truth of the gospel must be shared because, above all, it is fundamentally true. Not only true for us, but true for the world. It may not be the only truth; some philosophies, much of science, and many religions also have valid insights that Christians must acknowledge as true, if we are to be intellectually honest. And I have just argued that converted people find elements in their own pre-conversion tradition that have a deep affinity with aspects of the Christian gospel and doctrinal developments – as, indeed, many of the Wisdom traditions of the Bible are drawn from the literature and folklore of surrounding cultures. Moreover, we must admit that what particular Christians or sub-traditions hold to be true may be freighted with false assumptions or socio-cultural biases that need correction by internal self-examination and external criticism. Nevertheless, Christians believe that what believers point toward, even with all the inevitable foibles that beset humanity, is fundamentally true, must be told to all, and must find its way in open interaction with other faiths and philosophies which also may be advocating

something basically true. The freedom to do so has not always been affirmed by the world religions and social philosophies, or by all branches of Christianity equally; but the struggle for an open society where this could be done is the root of the “modern” rights to freedom of speech, expression, and press, as I have elsewhere shown.^[14]

Closely related is a second reason, often repeated in the New Testament: Christ has commanded believers to “go unto all the world....” Christianity is, like Buddhism and Islam, as the Japanese say, a “going” religion. It is export-prone, transcultural and jumps borders, by contrast with some other faiths that generate “staying” religions. Those are like Shinto or other “civil religions,” which are rooted in a particular territory, ethnic group, or culture and thus understand their own distinctive rites, rituals, and assumptions about the sacred as intrinsic to the solidarity of their local boundaries and identity.^[15] Christianity’s “going” seeks to offer a universal message to all the world. To deny the right and duty of Christians to manifest the faith by engaging in missions that eventuate in conversion is the height of intolerance, the denial that this major world religion and others can be what they are, the refusal to accept genuine pluralism. In the Christian case, those who see themselves as Christ’s disciples, who take Jesus as Lord and Savior, have no choice but to be obedient to this command; and those who call themselves Christians but make no effort in this regard have a difficult time maintaining their religious integrity. Of course, that does not mean that everyone must go abroad, or go door-to-door, or go about telling everyone that they are going to hell unless they adopt the faith immediately in the specific form the bearer of the good news prescribes. And it certainly does not mean that people should have Christianity imposed upon them, or that material inducements should be used to “capture souls”; but Christians cannot but share that which they (we) have come to hold. It is, rather, a duty to offer what we think is invaluable as a loving gesture to any willing to hear.

Third, Christians think that the scriptures and traditions to which they turn for ethical guidance bring greater justice into society. The faith is not only true, but it also leads to justice and bonds people into communities of mutual support and commitment. Of course, there are many definitions of justice that are held in various cultures and at various periods of history; but some common features can be found not only in the law given to Moses and in the teachings of Jesus but also in the cross-cultural and cross-temporal debates about the “law of nations,” as well as in the contemporary discussions of human rights and global ethics.^[16] Christians believe that this is so because the God who created the world is an ethical, righteous, free, and loving God who installed the basic capacity for justice and loving relationships in the created order. Since God created humanity in a way that all are made in the image of God, humans have a conferred dignity that is everywhere to be honored. Moreover, humans have, in various degrees, the capacity to think, will, and feel – of *intellectus*, *voluntas*, and *caritas*, what some have identified with mind, spirit, and body. Because these are present, humans have possibilities of conscience – coming to agreement about the first principles of right and wrong; freedom – being able to make choices and resolving to do good; and covenant – having the capability of bonding in communities of commitment under righteous law and for good ends, held together by love. That is why, Christians believe, all persons have, in some measure, the laws of God written on their hearts. They can recognize at least in part what is right; they can resolve to adhere to the good and to avoid evil; and they can experience binding commitments of entrustment and love.

Christians, like the ancients, are aware, however, of the fact that these capacities are fragile and incomplete. No human, save one, is fully divine. The dignity that all have in principle, and needs ever to be protected and cultivated, is not always evident in self-image, behavioral choices, or social relationships. That is because, in the Christian understanding of human nature, human beings and the world around them are incomplete, fragile, and prone to distortion and disruption. We call that propensity to unrighteousness or evil, to passivity or arrogance, to alienation or domination, "sin." It is a manifestation of residual ignorance, willfully embraced or violently imposed by a will to power, or ego-centricity or chauvinism. The forms of sin are legion. Indeed, Christians hold that, when they are converted, they do not automatically become righteous, capable of firm resolve, or loving, simply because they are converted. Christians know that they have not lived up to what they have pointed to regarding the ethical life of justice, and abuses of the faith have dogged its history and perpetuated injustice. Sin is defeated only in principle. All must admit that they have been complicit in patriarchy, slavery, crusades, witch-trials, inquisitions, colonialism, imperialism, nuclear bombing, ecological destruction, and the violation of children, and have sometimes offered religious defenses of these actions. And it makes no difference to the argument that Christianity brings justice to the world that every other world religion and great social philosophy has engaged in similar travesties. The point is that while Christians have an ultimate confidence in the justice of the one, triune, righteous and merciful God who finally rules nature and history, and know the right and the good and the ability to love in their hearts, they also know that believers are people who have too often betrayed the justice that all humans know at least in part. For this reason, Christianity can never be simply identified with idealism and optimism or with realism and pessimism. It understands the fact that life is so constituted, as portrayed in creation myths pregnant with layers of meaning, that it must always be lived in historical existence with what can be called an ultimate optimism and a penultimate pessimism, with a confidence in God and the necessity of building structures of justice that constrain evil and guide the powers of the common life.

In this connection, when Christians have some prospect of shaping the social ethos, modern believers know that some societies, allegedly based on Christian principles, have exemplified structural injustices that prevent others from correcting the ills that obviously exist or from gaining access to the benefits justice entails. Still, it is because the Christian faith embraces the idea that God's law and purposes are "written on the hearts of all" that we know these things are fundamentally wrong, and that there are possibilities of transformation. In fact, converts are called into communities of commitment that repeatedly call upon believers to confess their sins and failures, to repeatedly invoke God's forgiveness, guidance, wisdom, and courage, and to constantly engage in self-examination to correct ourselves, others, and whole societies, so that all may discover a deeper sense of God's righteousness, choice for humanity, and compassion. The creation of this new kind of community of commitment in fact alters the dynamics of every society where it is formed; it creates a new social space for the exercise of intellect, will, and affectional bonding that surpasses the spheres where the powers ordinarily operate. Christians believe, thus, in the necessity of repentance, the possibility of forgiveness, the corrigibility of injustice, wrong, and evil, and the formation of new kinds of social order. The justice of these forms of order is only partial in history; its fulfillment is in the ultimate future, for an eschatological atonement has been made on humanity's behalf. This belief in justice binds us to many believers in other faiths or philosophies and locks us into debates about the precise shape of justice in this or that complex situation.

This sense of the necessary participation in the struggles for justice, in spite of our own foibles and failures, comes thus from certain basic doctrines that are held to be universally true of all humanity, although they are only partially shared by other world religions and great social philosophies. It is partly based on the belief that a righteous God graciously created the world and propounded just laws to rule it and human life, as mentioned above. This belief is shared with all serious theists. Further, it entails the conviction that humans are created in God's image, and thus graced to have the capacity to know, in some serious measure, what is right, to choose it, and to develop a passion for just relationships and communities, also as suggested above. This view is not shared by all, although most religious and philosophical traditions have an account of the development of human capacities for the good, hold people accountable for their choices, and honor those who exhibit compassion and sympathy. They also usually have an account of the evil that blocks these possibilities, from which we need to be saved.

Christians hold that this reconstruction has already begun, not by human initiative, but by God's, and claims that Christ in his lifetime inaugurated a new age in the development of humanity, one in which the power of God's reign, which will not be completely fulfilled in history, is nevertheless already at work within and among the persons and processes of social history, pointing to a renewal and fulfillment of all that promises the good and a judgment over that which prevents that good. The power of God's reign can be seen in those who are called to various offices and roles in society to contribute to the process. The "powers" that influence souls and civilizations can also be marshaled into service so that they, like converted persons, can contribute to God's salvific purposes. Thus progress points toward the symbol of the social future; the Kingdom fulfilled would be a New Jerusalem, a complex civilization to which all the nations can bring their gifts.

Christians differ in this vision of the ultimate future from many other traditions. Joining with the elders or the ancestors is the desired end of many primal religions. The *moksha* of the Hindus is not the *nirvana* of the Buddhist, or the Paradise of the Muslim. None of these are like the total harmony of heaven, earth, and society of the Confucian, or the perfect classless society of the Communist, and these in turn are not like the New Jerusalem of the Christian. Many of these hold a more regressive rather than a progressive view. Many want to return to the primal state of affairs – back to the simple ways of the forebears, returning to the garden, away from complex civilization, overcoming modern individualism in favor of a primal acosmic consciousness or a romanticized communitarian solidarity. Christianity doubts that these are possible or desirable. It may foresee rewards to the personally virtuous, as do all the religious traditions of the world, but the various regressive views are unlikely to be able to constructively shape a complex, globalizing civilization.

This is particularly important to note in a world where international, cross-cultural, and multi-religious encounters and clashes have become increasingly common and are creating the basis for what may become an incredibly differentiated and interdependent civil society, worldwide in scope. This new comprehending context is increasingly the one in which we all live; it relativizes every other contextual mode of social reflection and action. It challenges both the contextual Eurocentric theologies of the Christendom of the era of established churches that spread under the umbrella of colonialization, and the ethnocentric contextual theologies that derive from the new nationalism of the more recent de-colonializing period. We are forced to

ask again about trans-contextual standards of truth and justice and normative models of pluralist organization to challenge local or imperial pretenses.

What Then Shall We Do?

A key question is: what do Christians have to offer in this new context? We stand, and we think humanity stands, between structures of life and meaning created good by God, but fallen into distortion, and a promise of salvation in a recreated world that is anticipated in the present in the hearts of persons, in the life of the church, and in the dynamics of God's reign in the world, due to the coming of Jesus Christ, but not yet fully actual in social history. And the answer is, I believe, to renew and extend the evangelization of the world, which presumes that the God whom we worship is universal, the Gospel that we believe is trans-contextual, and the principles of justice that they entail are valid for humanity. This is not only a matter of supporting this evangelization wherever it is taking place, reminding the overheated optimists of the reality of sin and the cynical pessimists of both the capacities that are given and the promise of what is to come. It also means thinking through a missiology that attends to the problem of how to build a viable socio-economic fabric that is just in regard to this new comprehending context that we face. It would be a mistake to reduce the accent on creation, for without the basic structures of existence nothing would be, or all would be facing nothing but entropy. Nor can we reduce the accent on sin, for that indispensable doctrine points to the realistic limits of what we can do and how easily all that we seek to do as we employ our capabilities can be plunged into distortion. It would also be foolish to deny the importance of eschatology, for our vision of the ultimate end has already, and will more fully, condition whether we embrace and try to rechannel what we now have or whether we will seek to resist and destroy the transformations at hand. Yet, since we live between the times, and between the universal aspects of the faith and our local conditions of life, we must face another question: what can provide the kind of guidance for the proximate, emergent context in which we now must live? The central mission of the Christian churches today, I think, is to convert not only persons and traditions and the powers intentionally, but also to draw them into those providential patterns of life that will enhance open societies; further encounters, discussion and debate among the religions about the nature of truth, justice and the constituting forms and ultimate ends of life; and try to form those contexts in a way that will be conducive to the formation of a civilization that allows us to live together. This could be, I propose, a public theology of providence.

This proposal, of course, presumes that new powers, principalities, thrones, and dominions are present in the society and are creating new artificial cultural and civilizational options that cannot be stopped and should not be avoided. These could very well bring about a global civil society, the nature and character of which is quite undecided because at present it has neither a governing religious inner moral and spiritual architecture that gives it an inner heart of righteous and freely chosen love, nor an exterior socio-economic order that gives it an exterior form of justice. It is, I believe, not a question as to whether we will have globalization, but a question of its nature and character – a question that is, in view of the encounter with other religions, the greatest missiological issue of our time; it is the locus where theology, ethics, and realistic social analysis meets.

This proposal grows out of what is already implied in the analysis of our new, common context, and in our review of what it is that Christianity has to offer the globalizing world. What is implied is that the social and material forces which we identify with globalization – the spread of constitutional democracy, the legal advocacy for human rights, the growth of science-based technology, the expansive productivity of corporate capitalism, the increased cross-fertilization of cultural creativity, and deepening of religious encounter and borrowing, etc. – are the largely unintended and often quite indirect results of Christian-shaped sets of civilizational development. The theological assumptions and implications of this tradition provided these spheres of human activity with the inner moral rudder at key points in their cultivation; they reshaped, revised, redirected, or otherwise reformed these spheres of life over time and thus formed the inner ethical and spiritual architecture on which they rest.

It is also true that much of twentieth-century theology has not sustained its relationship to these movements, except in the negative, and that the “scientific study of religion” has engaged them in the positive, and thereby disallowed the role of religion or theology as themselves basic interpretive or normative forces in human life. Thus, the movements that we associate with globalization are today present not only in the West in hyper-secular or neo-pagan garb, and are being exported to the world without a compelling metaphysical-moral vision to guide them. At home and abroad these movements become subject to chaos by failing to provide new models for family life in the new complexities of global civil society, new visions for establishing constitutional democracies with human rights, new prospects of viable economic systems, or new directions for redefined cultural creativity. They fail because they do not, above all, give the whole a compelling frame of reference. We should not doubt why secularistic, economic theories of globalization are being advocated by some so forcefully and resisted so intently by others; but is a debate of the morally and spiritually empty. Neither should we be surprised as to why people are making the preferential option for evangelical and Pentecostal theologies, or turning to fundamentalism. These at least provide comprehensive frameworks for personal and interpersonal meaning, even if they seldom have a serious theology of social history, what I am calling a theology of providence.

The key to a theology of providence is linked to the double meaning of the word. The word “providence” comes from the Latin for “foresight,” a translation of the Greek *pronoia*. It involves, of course, a looking forward, a living with a vision of and for the future, and the making of adequate preparation (“provision”) for its anticipated eventualities. It is possible to direct attention to the future, even if one never knows for sure what will happen, if there is a confidence that life has a wise, free, and loving will behind it. The whole idea involves the presumption that while the world is a complex, developing system with all sorts of regularities, there are also occurrences that seem fortuitous or serendipitous, even miraculous, and that the divine reality that stands behind the whole from the beginning bends the contingencies of existence, including the tragic, distorted, broken, and vicious parts of life, in the direction of a new order and the promise of fulfilled meaning, rather than in the direction of chaos, entropy or nihilism. Providence, thus, is based in the belief that this has happened in the past not only in creation, the exact nature of which is lost in time and subject to continued speculation and investigation, but in history – in and even through the disruptive dynamics of historical development – toward a meaning that is not fully disclosed, but is present in the lives of people and communities in ways that point toward a fulfillment or salvation in and beyond all ordinary

history. And yet it loses some of its integrity if it is reduced to a theory of the necessities of nature, as in Leibnitz's "theodicy," or to the evolutionary dynamics of pantheistic becoming, as in modern process theology. These have, like the Greek *moira* (fate), the Islamic *kismet*, or the Buddhist *dharma* an element of an impersonally determined fixed destiny about them. Providence, however, presumes the ongoing caring creativity of the creator and redeemer God in the midst of a sinful and distorted world, and the awareness of some relative actualization in personal and social history of the promise of a fundamental renewal of meaning and life, as seen in Christ's inauguration of the Kingdom and Resurrection, that points to an ultimate New Jerusalem.^[17]

Between the world as originally intended by God and as distorted by sin, and the world as it can be perfected by God's re-creation, what the Christian idea of providence offers to the globalizing world is the confidence that God is concerned with the affairs, institutions, and events of life in time, and is empowering humans, even in the midst of sin and evil, to find greater truth, establish greater justice, discover greater love, and form ever wider networks of association for the facing of daily practical needs and the understanding of the more ultimate questions than most of ordinary life experience, philosophy, and even the world religions reveal. The classical theologies of providence presumed that it had to do with counter-indicated events in people's lives and the unexpected re-ordering of the way society was organized. These theologies, as they were developed over the centuries, recognized that this view has implications for how meaning is to be found in the face of adversity, how apparently chance occasions brought people and ideas and resources together at the right time and place so that something promising could take place, and how, thus, the troubled lives of persons, the community of faith, and the society at large might be ordered to make the possibilities of fulfillment more likely.^[18]

This is the quality that pertains to our questions of mission in the context of our increasingly pluralistic, technologically transformative, urban-cosmopolitan, potentially global civilization that often seem fractured, disruptive, contentious, and unpromising. Key concepts that point to the presence of providence in the midst of this kind of life can be found in vocation, covenant, and wisdom. Each of these is rooted in creation and points toward a new creation inaugurated in Jesus Christ, although, as indicated, a theology of providence cannot be reduced to the logic of a creation at some point in past time nor to the ultimate fulfillment yet to come. It is a key basis for a viable interim ethic, for times when we live between the "already" and the "not yet," as Paul put it.

Vocation, Covenant, and Wisdom for the In-between Times

To persons and groups living in the in-between times, Christianity offers a distinctive view of *vocation*, the idea that we humans not only have a dignity and certain capacities given by the fact that all are created in the image of God, but that we are called into being to make a distinct contribution to human well-being and to the actualization of the purposes of God by the functions we are to perform in this life. Our vocations in the Christian view are not given by our birth status, by our rank in some stratified division of labor, or by the ethnic community of which we are a part. They are decidedly more personal than that. The vocation to be a disciple of Christ and a member of his church not only makes each individual more than a member of his or her community of origin, it involves also attending to a cluster of vocations in society to which

we are called in a new way – as spouse, parent, citizen, volunteer in some worthy cause, and specialist in some useful work necessary for the life of the community as a whole. This cluster of social vocations is to be discovered according to each person’s unique combination of talent, inclination, and cultivated craft or professional training, that constitutes a unique personal fabric that one feels “called” by God to become and that one is judged by the community to be worthy. And, if the community is so structured that it does not allow the actualization of a person’s authentic vocation, if it does not allow vocational opportunities to particular classes, races, castes, or sexes, if the society is so structured that the person cannot find an opportunity to exercise one or another of these vocations within its confines, the society can and must be reformed as a part of the mission of the church, or the person must be allowed to leave and join another society. That which does not accord with, or actually subverts, the possibilities given creation and does not invite to a new vision of the future, is against providence and is subject to reformation or reconstruction as a part of the mission of the church.

Moreover, various institutions in a society also have vocations under God’s providential care for humans in the midst of life on earth. It is, for example, the vocation of the educational system to convey a love of truth and of learning; of a legal system to render justice and induce a respect for the law; of the medical system to reduce pain and suffering, heal, and evoke a due respect for the human body and mind; and of the economic system to efficiently produce goods, services, and additional wealth for the commonwealth and to properly reward those who labor to do so. Likewise, it is the responsibility of governments and of social service agencies to care for the neglected with compassion, to ease their distress, and help them find viable options for their own lives; of the cultural system to encourage the construction of excellent artifacts of beauty and grace and to express what depths of feeling reside in the human heart; etc. If institutions able to make such vocations their own are not available, they have to be created as part of the mission to the world; if institutions such as these do not attract persons with a deep sense of vocation into them, deliver their intended purposes in accord with the first principles of justice, or develop monopolies over their capabilities in such a way as to exploit the people, they too are subject to reformation or reconstruction as a part of the mission of the church.^[19]

Paralleling the idea of vocation is the idea of *covenant*. As Israel was called into covenant, and as those called to the anointed offices of the Prophets, Priests, and Kings of old were dedicated to fulfilling of God’s covenants with humanity, and as Jesus is seen as the Christ who fulfilled these offices and combined them in a fundamental covenant renewal, calling and covenant are intrinsically linked. Covenant may have to do with either the relationship of God to humanity, in which a superior party sets the terms which the inferior must adhere to (Heb: *ba’alei brit*), or with the providential ordering of various human relationships or associations by a voluntary agreement or alliance between parties formally equal under Godly principles of justice and righteousness that they do not construct but discern and make their own (Heb: *bnai brit*). Covenantal relationships thus differ from hierarchical or imperial domination and instead reflect a theonomous-democratic conception of the right order in institutional life. Covenantal relations also differ from contractual agreements wherein people define their mutual obligations for a term with no reference to any onto-theo-logical order. At the same time it must be said that some stratified orders of the hierarchical or imperial types, when governed by a principle of subsidiarity that limits their propensity to domination (as in Roman Catholic ecclesiological theory, some “conciliarist” theories) clearly approximate covenantal relationships; and some

social contracts that define mutual obligations within a just legal framework and for the common good do also (as in “voluntary associational” ecclesiologies and some “federalist” theories).

Covenants not only set the ethical framework of a polity that allow the dynamic interaction of persons and groups in a social context, they form institutional structures that can sustain community among people who are not the same, who do not agree on all matters, yet who can at least cooperate in debating what is right and good and fitting to do, and in carrying out tasks together that none could accomplish alone. At its best, covenant forms the exterior social architecture for sustained friendships and loving relationships that are reliable and purposeful, and they thereby anticipate the fellowship and harmony that many pray for in the life to come. Covenants, like vocations, are seen as a gift of grace; they constrain conflict and domination, and foster community and trust.

In the midst of a globalizing environment, it appears that covenantal arrangements may be necessary to order the institutions of the common life. Is it not possible that covenantal relations between husband and wife would reduce the stratified patterns of patriarchy and prevent the tendency to view intimate relationships as merely contractual? In contemporary political life, they would support the attempts to spread constitutional democracy and to cooperate with international partners, and reduce the tendencies to neo-imperialism, or the resurgence of priestly rule of the political order. In economics, they would reorganize the relationship of management and labor in the corporation, and the relationship of corporation to related stakeholders beyond the operation of the business itself. And so on we could go – into areas of medicine, and education, technology and law enforcement. In fact, the most likely non-imperial way of facing the global future and its new multiplicity of institutions (the transnational corporations, international media, non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups, along with the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, the United Nations, OPEC, the G-7, the EU, NAFTA, ASEAN, etc., etc.) would be to draw them into federated covenantal patterns, just as various alliances, leagues, peace pacts and professional associations are drawn into various networks of cooperation and regard under law.^[20]

And third, we turn to the idea of *wisdom*. In the scriptures, some of the most neglected portions have to do with the wisdom literature – the treatments of observation and reflection on the character of life and the ways of society. It covers the benefits of a certain largeness of mind, respect for the mastery of some distinctive skill or of valid insights that come from the simple and not from the learned scholars, the error of wanton and dissolute living, and the rewards of prudence in the practical conduct of life in the midst of complexity. To be sure, we have accounts of the fact that the wisdom we find, for example, in Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Daniel, the Pastoral epistles, and embedded in many narratives, is sometimes mixed with sorcery, magic, and astrology; but time and again the practitioners of these “arts” are defeated when they are tested in an encounter with anyone with divinely given wisdom. What is remarkable about this wisdom is that no small amount of it is drawn from extrabiblical sources and does not claim to be revelatory. And yet, it is included in canonical texts!

It is more than fascinating in this regard that missionaries over the centuries have been the ones who have recorded the oral lore and translated the wisdom of peoples around the world and published it for all to see. This signifies one of the key, often neglected features of missiology in

a global environment – having a due regard for the insightful wisdom of the other, and being willing to learn from it, and include its insights into one’s own tradition and commitments. If the impact of missions on other traditions is sometimes the conversion of them, the reverse is also possible – the expansion of one’s own insights by the inclusion of valid wisdom in other traditions. One’s own view of scripture, tradition, reason and experience can be expanded in a globalized world. It is possible to suggest that we should never trust any missionary who has nothing to learn from the people he or she is trying to convert or from their religious and cultural tradition. Much the same can be said about those who feel much the same about modern science, the social sciences, or secular philosophies.

If what I have suggested about the way missions tend to work is accurate and true, there is no prospect for the ending of the missionary task in the future. It will, and should, continue to convert persons, the work with representative people, planting a new social organization, the church, in the midst of their lives, which will introduce new possibilities for organizing all areas of the common life, and will indirectly contribute to the conversion of traditions. In the process, the fundamental notions of the faith – Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Christ – will ordinarily dominate the focus of attention, and will be interpreted in highly contextual ways.

Today, as we live with the awareness of a new context, a globalizing one that disrupts and comprehends all local contexts and offers the fragile possibility of a global civil society that could become a very complex world civilization, our missiology must not cease, but take upon itself the quest for ways to structure this new fabric with an inclusive justice, one that brings the various offices and powers of life to their proper purpose and into interdependence with the wider fabric of life. I have thus proposed that we consider those powerful motifs of providence that are often neglected in missiological thought – vocation, covenant, and wisdom – as models from scripture, and contributions of Christianity to the world, that have allowed and can foment anew the formation of a more just fabric this new common life than any known alternative. They can encourage a civilizational environment wherein missions and the respectful encounter of the many traditions may continue with the least violent clash, and with the highest prospects for the flourishing of human life and the greater understanding of God’s truth and justice.

Endnotes

^[1] For historical examples of these dynamics in the West, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For an analysis of cross-religious dynamics, see my "Missions/ Missionary Activity," *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Eliade, et al. (New York: MacMillan, 1986), pp. 563-570. [Revised edition forthcoming, 2006].

^[2] R. Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion, Part One" *Africa* 45/1 (1975), pp. 219-235; and "On the Rationality of Conversion, Part Two," *Africa* 45/2 (1975), pp. 373-379.

^[3] See Sebastian C.H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (New Delhi: Oxford U. Press, 2003). This is one of the most important new studies of the psychological and social implications of conversion and the context in which it occurs in recent years.

^[4] See my “Deciding for God: The Right to Convert in Protestant Perspectives,” with D. Hainsworth, *Sharing the Book: Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism*. Ed. John Witte, Jr., and R. C. Martin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 201-230.

^[5] I am, in this matter, indebted to, and a revisionist of the tradition of sociology that derives from the post-Marxist theorists, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch wrote of the “withdrawing” and the “aggressive” sects in Christianity in contrast to the “church-type” directions of Catholicism and the Reformation, while Weber saw parallels in other religions. Their work implies that faith shapes ecclesiology and that it shapes the social polity.

^[6] See the summaries of new studies in this area in Lawrence Harrison and S. H. Huntington, *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

^[7] R. W. Hefner, ed., “Introduction” *Conversion to Christianity, op. cit.*, p. 34.

^[8] John Witte, Jr. and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im were the general editors of the research project “Soul Wars: The Problem and Promise of Proselytism in the New World Order,” from which came several volumes, including: An-Na’im, ed., *Proselytism and Self-Determination in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Paul Sigmund, *Religious Freedom and Evangelization in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); and John Witte, JR., and M. Bourdeaux, eds., *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); and Witte, et al, *Sharing the Book, loc. cit.*

^[9] It is, in my view, one of the great current failures of Western understandings of the Middle East that modern political leaders could see what they held to be authoritarianism, patriarchy, militance and resistance to “modern” cultural and economic practices in Arabic cultures, but did not see how deeply Islamic convictions were the bases for these patterns. Thus, it was believed that if the people were liberated from tyranny by a “regime change”, they would “naturally” want “democracy” in the Western mode, for it was held to be a “natural” inclination of human nature, not an alternative theologically-driven vision that only partially overlaps with possibilities within Islam. Similarly, Western academics, no few Christians, and many Indians trained in the western secular disciplines (or caught up in socialist and communist ideologies of mass political movements) fundamentally misunderstood the religious texture of South Asian societies and were utterly unprepared for the power of resurgent Buddhism (in Sri Lanka or Burma) and Hindutva (in India), as if these were essentially motivated by economic and political interests.

^[10] I have suggested this more fully in both *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization; God and Globalization*, vol. 3 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), written with Diane Obenchain.

^[11] See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2002).

^[12] See David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Balance of Power in the World* (New York: Regnery Press, 2003). This book, I understand, has had an ambiguous reception in China.

^[13] This has been seriously attempted, as S. Kim documents, “The Debate on Conversion...: *loc. cit.*, Ch. 8.

^[14] See my *Creeds, Society and Human Rights* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1984); and “Deciding for God: The Right to Convert in Protestant Perspective,” in J. Witte, *op. cit.* (1999), written with Deirdre Hainsworth.

^[15] John Mbiti has argued as much for primal traditions with their loyalty to ethnic identity and the elders; Sze-kar Wan for traditional Chinese culture with its emphasis on “familism” and imperial “Middle Kingdom”; and Thomas Thangaraj for Indian traditions, which he sees as “bio-centric” and “geo-centric” and, in a certain way, particular “dei-centric” in their essays in my *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization, loc. cit.*

^[16] The debates on these matters continue to expand, especially against the post-modern claims that there are no universal absolutes or master narratives, as can be seen in these suggestive if not fully representative volumes: Michael Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1998); Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1999); Ian Shapiro & L. Brilmayer, eds, *Global Justice* (New York: N.Y. U. Press, 1999); and Shimreingam Shimray, *A Theology of Human Rights: A Critique of Politics* (Jorhat, India: Barkataki & Co., 2002)

^[17] Religions differ on the character of that fulfillment, on what they think must be overcome for that to happen, and what best overcomes that which inhibits it. See Mark Heim, *Salvations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995). As I have argued elsewhere, this ratchets the argument up to the question of which has the more accurate view of the human condition. Here and now I am interested in the providential conditions to engage in that dispute.

^[18] A compact overview of the history of the doctrine and some of its key implications can be found in C. A. Beckwith, "Providence," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Rev. ed. (N.Y.: Funk and Wagnals, 1911) v. IX, pp. 306ff. It is notable that very few of the more recent theological dictionaries and encyclopedias have an entry of any length on providence, and none make connection to social ethics or missiology. It is a defect in modern theology, perhaps due to the "naturalistic" reductionisms of Leibniz, Process, etc.

^[19] These observations on "vocation" are informed particularly by Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publisher, 1990); Gordon Preece, *The Viability of the Vocation Tradition in Trinitarian, Creedal and Reformed Perspective: The Threefold Call* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998); Douglas Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 2004); and my "Vocation," *Oxford Companion to Theological Ethics* (Cambridge: Oxford U. Press, forthcoming 2005).

^[20] In these comments regarding covenant, I have drawn on Daniel Elazar, *The Covenant Tradition in Politics*, 4 vol. (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1995-1999); William Everett, *Religion, Federalism and the Struggle for Public Life* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1997); Kihyoung Shin, *The Covenantal Interpretation of the Business Corporation* (New York: University Press of America, 2001); and my *Covenant and Commitments* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1997).