

**Rudolf C. Heredia, *Changing Gods: Rethinking Conversion in India*,  
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It can be difficult for people in Western, individualist and secularised cultures to understand some of the elements of religious fervour, even extremism, that have become press headlines in recent times. One of the things that makes Heredia's book important is his experiential insight into the deep connections between religion, identity, daily life, government and street politics, as well as multiple levels of relationships in eastern and sub-continental cultures. Matters regarded as being of such deep moment in one's whole being, call forth passionate and sometimes destructive responses, out of kilter with the universal mantra of most religions: love, peace and justice. Particularly in India, religion is a dynamic reality, suffusing the whole of life. As such, Indian religion holds the dual potential to be a battleground, as various sects seek to strengthen their numbers by multiple conversions or as a model for tolerance if the sheer diversity of its faith traditions is allowed to unfold naturally.

It is within the context of this potential that Rudolf Heredia, a Jesuit priest, has written a social, historical and political study of mass conversions from one faith tradition to another. In his book, *Changing Gods*, he argues that the aggressive conversions of the past have weakened the fabric of Indian society, through the fracturing of identity and relationships, alienating people from their communal traditions and values, and contributing to a tense and sometimes violent undertow in Indian society. Heredia argues for a 'religious disarmament' and a constructive interaction between faiths rather than the aggressive proselytisation that has been characteristic of inter-religious relationships in India's past. He is not opposed to conversion *per se*, understanding that there will always be real reasons for people to change, but arguing that there is 'no religious merit in political posturing or conversion for socio-economic gain', nor is there humanity in coercive conversion practices. What he does argue against is conversion

involving people in the 'politics of hate' and conflict. In fact, the matter of religious conversion has become politicised as anti-conversion laws have been introduced in some Indian states to prevent mass conversions through improper means such as coercion or financial inducements. Such laws, according to Heredia, tread a fine line between protecting people against unwanted violation of their identity, and actually violating their freedom to make choices based on personal conviction.

Like many of his Jesuit confreres, Heredia is a multi-disciplined scholar. He is both theologian and sociologist, but in this work his voice is that of a social scientist, seeking a common ground that will enable a national valuing of diversity without the loss of any sect's ability to stand in their 'own truth' in the process. Some would see his historical perspective as selective, seeming to place much of the causality for the current situation in the Hindu imperative to maintain its dominance in Indian culture. However, it is clear from his acceptance of the troubled and often culturally aggressive history of his own faith tradition, Christianity, that Heredia sees the causes of the social tensions resulting from aggressive conversions as shared responsibilities between both Indian and non-Indian faith traditions. As he notes in his preface: 'Religion has moved centre-stage in the identity politics raging through this land' with large-scale and aggressive conversions by any of the traditions inimical to the harmony and understanding that are essential for a society trying to value a rich heterogeneity of religious tradition that is fluid and still evolving, as the nation itself is evolving continually through its own dialectics.

In a well argued and documented work, Heredia has been able to capture the paradox between Nehru's understanding that he needed to establish 'a secular state in a religious society' and Gandhi's challenge to Christian converts that they had in essence changed their nationality in adopting Christianity, which, in his time was still one of the pillars of colonial Western culture. Gandhi was opposed to Christian missionaries for this very reason. They wanted to change, not just

the faith tradition, but the whole tradition. What he called for was reform, through change of the heart, not through change of religious or social tradition. But whether you believe in one faith's traditions ability to share its message actively or not, when religious faith is so rooted in personal and national identity, someone has to call for a moratorium on more active proselytising. Heredia tries to do so, asking for tolerance, dialogue, respect for identity, the possibility of 'multiple belongings', and a more global ethic. He is however, realistic enough to know that in such diversity as India displays, there will always be many elements that will remain in tension, unresolved and sometimes unresolvable, even by the most open and flexible of dialogues. Certainly, political measures, such as geographic partition are seen in Heredia's historical reflection, to have been unable to resolve the complexities of the situation, or to diminish significantly the religious interconnections within the Indian polity. Perhaps inter-religious dialogue may have a better chance of success. At least it's talking in its own field, even if from divergent conceptual foundations.

Heredia's book is well-structured with short summaries of key concepts prefacing each chapter. It is a comprehensive, balanced and well-researched study, but may well not please those aggressively opposing or promoting the right to proselytise. Nor will it please those with perceived birthrights to social hegemony. It seeks middle ground, where conversation between people seeking mutual understanding occurs. There is a more than useful index for reference and an adequate, broad-based bibliography that looks interesting. Apart from its contribution to understanding the intense and powerful spectrum impacts of religion in some cultures, the book may also serve as an intriguing *caveat* for those studying the science of religious mission, or *Missiology*.

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