

Conversion, Culture, and Cognitive Categories

How much must Papayya "know" about the Gospel to be converted?

By Paul G. Hiebert

Can an illiterate peasant become a Christian after hearing the Gospel only once? And, if so, what do we mean by conversion?

Imagine for a moment, Papayya, an Indian peasant, returning to his village after a hard day's work in the fields. His wife is still preparing the evening meal, so to pass the time, he wanders over to the village square. There he notices a stranger surrounded by a few curiosity seekers. Tired and hungry, he sits down to hear what the man is saying. For an hour he listens to a message of a new God, and something which he hears moves him deeply. Later he asks the stranger about the New Way, and then, almost as if by impulse, he bows his head and prays to this God who is said to have appeared to humans in the form of Jesus. He doesn't quite understand it all. As a Hindu he worships Vishnu who incarnated himself as a human or animal in order to rescue humankind at different times in history. He also knows many of the other 33 million gods village proverbs say exist. But the stranger said there is only one god, and this God has appeared among humans only once. Moreover, this Jesus is said to be the Son of God, but the Christian did not say anything about

God's wife. It is all confusing to him.

The man turns to go home, and a new set of questions flood his mind. Can he still go to the temple in order to pray? Should he tell his family about his new faith? And how can he learn more about Jesus—he cannot read the few papers the stranger gave him, and there are no other Christians within a day's walk. Who knows when the stranger will come again?

Conversion and cultural differences

Can Papayya become a Christian after hearing the Gospel only once? To this we can only say yes. To say that a person must be educated, have an extensive knowledge of the Bible, or live a near perfect life would mean that the Good News is only for an elite few in the world.

But what essential change has taken place when Papayya responds to the Gospel message? Certainly he has acquired some new information. He has heard of Christ and His redemptive work on the Cross. He may also have heard a story or two about Christ's life on earth. But his knowledge is minimal. Papayya could not pass even the simplest tests of Bible knowledge or theology.

To complicate matters further, the knowledge Papayya has, he understands in radically different ways from Christians in the West or in other parts of the world. For example, the English speaker talks of God, but Papayya speaks of *devudu* because he is a Telugu speaker. But *devudu* does not have precisely the same

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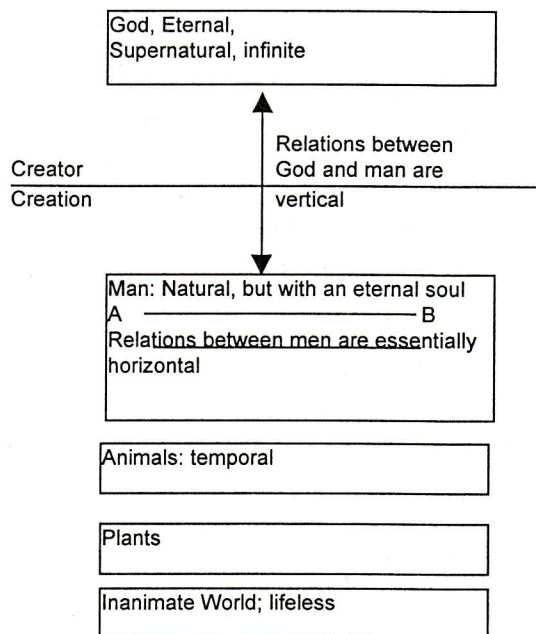
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meaning as God, just as the English word *God* does not correspond exactly to the Greek word *theos* found in the New Testament.

Ordinary English speakers divide living beings into several different categories. One of these is supernatural beings, a category into which they put God, angels, Satan, and demons. Another is human beings and includes men, women, and children. A third is animals, and a fourth is plants. In addition to these, there is the

category of inanimate objects, such as sand and rocks, as well as a few kinds of life that are not so easily classified and over which there is some disagreement, such as virus and germs (see Figure 1). In this system of classification, God is categorically different from human beings, and human beings from animals and plants.¹ The incarnation means that God crossed the categorical difference between himself and humans and became a human.

AMERICAN CONCEPT OF LIFE



INDIAN CONCEPT OF LIFE

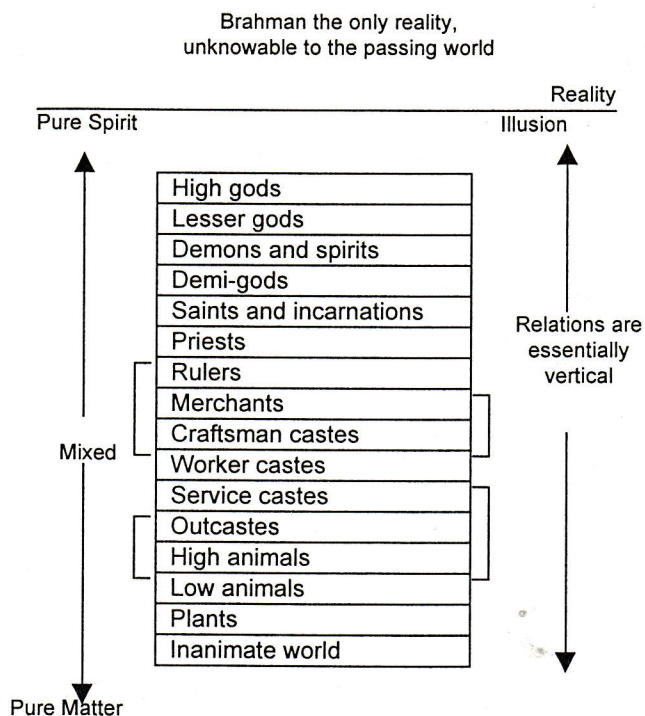


Figure 1. A comparison of American and Indian views of life.

Telugu speakers do not differentiate between different kinds of life. All forms of life are thought to be manifestations of a single life: gods, demons, humans, animals, plants, and even what appear to be inanimate objects all have the same kind of life (see Figure 1). To be sure, the gods have more of this life than humans, and humans more than animals or plants. But there is no real difference between gods and humans or humans and animals. After death, good humans may be reborn as gods, and wicked gods as animals. Moreover, gods come down constantly to earth as incarnations to help humankind, just as a rich man might stoop to help his servant.

The problem we face, then, is that when we translate the Word of God into Telugu, not only is there a change in sounds from *God* to *devudu*, but also a change in basic meanings. There is a fundamental difference in the ways in which the two words are viewed, and in the ways these words are related to other words belonging to the same cognitive domain.

If *devudu* does not carry the biblical connotations of the word *God*, then certainly we must find another word for translating it. There are many others that suggest themselves: *ishvarudu*, *bhagavanthudu*, *parameshvara*, and so on. But upon examination we find that all of these carry the same essential meaning as *devudu*. There is, in fact, no word in Telugu that carries the same connotations as either the English word *God* or the Greek word *theos* (nor do these two have exactly the same meaning). Nor is *God* the only word with which we have a problem in translation. Similar differences exist between all the other major words of any two languages.

Now we must ask not only what knowledge must Papayya have to become a Christian, but also whether this knowledge must be perceived in a particular way—from a particular worldview. Must Papayya learn the English or the Greek meaning for *god* before he becomes a Christian?

Since it is so hard to measure a person's beliefs and concepts, would it not be better to test his conversion by means of changes in his life? Can we not define a Christian as a person who goes to church on Sunday, and who does not drink liquor or smoke? Here, too, the change at conversion may not be dramatic. There is no church for Papayya to attend. The circuit preacher may call only a half dozen times a year. Papayya cannot read the Scriptures. His theology is found in the few Christians songs he learned to sing. To be sure, he no longer worships at the Hindu temple, but otherwise his life is much the same. He carries on his caste occupation and lives as most other villagers do. Is he then not a Christian?

Conversion and category differences

What does it mean to be a Christian? Before we can answer this question, we must look more closely at our own thought patterns—at what we mean by the word *Christian*. This word, like many other words, refers to a set of people or things that we think are alike in some manner or other. It refers to a category that exists in our minds. To be sure, God, looking at the hearts of people, knows who are His. It is He who one day will divide between the saved and the lost. But here on earth, we as humans pass judgments, we decide for ourselves who is a Christian, and, therefore, what it

means to be a Christian. What criteria do we commonly use?

Before we answer this question, we must ask an even more fundamental question: what kind of category are we going to use? Modern studies of human thought (see bibliography) show us that our mind forms categories in at least three different ways, and each of the three kinds of categories has its own structural characteristics. For our discussion here we will look at two of these types: (1) bounded sets and (2) centered sets.²

1. *Bounded sets:*

Many of our words refer to bounded sets: *apples, oranges, pencils, and pens*, for instance. In fact, the English language, probably borrowing from the Greek, uses bounded sets for most of its nouns—the basic building blocks of the language.

What is a bounded set? How does our mind form it? In creating a bounded set, our mind puts together things that share some common characteristics. *Apples*, for example, are objects that are *the firm fleshy somewhat round fruit of a Rosaceous tree. They are usually red, yellow, or green and are eaten raw or cooked*.³

Bounded sets have certain structural characteristics—that is, they force us to look at things in a certain way (see Figure 2). Let us use the category *apples* to illustrate some of these:

a. The category is created by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set. For example, an apple is (1) a kind of *fruit* that is (2) *firm*, (3) *fleshy*, (4) *somewhat round*, and so on. Any fruit that meets these requirements (assuming we have an adequate definition) is an *apple*.

b. The category is defined by a clear boundary. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. It cannot be 70% apple and 30% pear. Most of the effort in defining the category is spent on defining and maintaining the boundary. In other words, not only must we say what an *apple* is, we must also clearly differentiate it from *oranges, pears*, and other similar objects that are *not apples*.

c. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics. All apples are 100% apple. One is not more apple than another. Either a fruit is an apple or it is not. There may be different sizes, shapes, and varieties, but they are all the same in that they are all apples. There is no variation implicit within the structuring of the category.

d. Bounded sets are static sets. If a fruit is an apples, it remains an apple whether it is green, ripe, or rotten. The only change occurs when an apples ceases to be an apple (e.g., by being eaten), or when something like an orange is turned into an apples (something we cannot do). The big question, therefore, is whether an object is inside or outside the category. Once it is within, there can be no change in its categorical status.

2. *“Christian” as a bounded set:*

What happens to our concept of *Christian* if we define it in terms of a bounded set? If we use the above characteristics of a bounded set, we come up with the following:

a. We would define *Christian* in terms of a set of essential or definitive characteristics. Because we cannot see into the hearts of people, we generally choose characteristics that we can see or hear, namely tests of orthodoxy (right

beliefs) or orthopraxy (right practice) or both.

For example, some define a Christian as a person who believes (gives verbal acknowledgement to) a specific set of doctrines such as the deity of Christ, the Virgin birth, and so on. Some make such lists quite long and add on specific doctrines of eschatology or soteriology. Others, convinced that true *belief* is more than a mental argument with a set of statements, look for the evidence of belief in changed lives and behavior. A Christian, then, is one who does not smoke or drink alcohol, and so on.

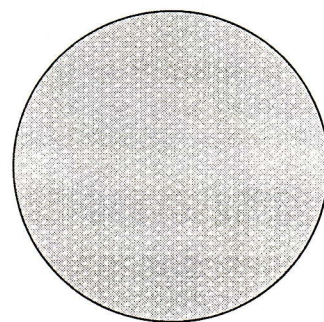
b. We would make a clear distinction between a *Christian* and a *non-Christian*. There is no place in between. Moreover, maintaining this boundary is critical to the maintenance of the category. Therefore, it is essential that we determine who is a Christian and who is not, and to keep the two sharply differentiated. We want to make sure to include those who are truly Christian and to exclude as heretics those who claim to be but are not. To have an unclear boundary is to undermine the very concept of *Christian* itself.

c. We would view all *Christians* as essentially the same. There are old, experienced Christians and young converts, but all are Christian d.

We would stress evangelism as the major task—getting people into the category. Moreover, we would see conversion as a single dramatic event—crossing the boundary between being a *non-Christian* and being a *Christian*. To do so, a person must acquire the defining characteristics which we have outlined above. Crossing the boundary is a decision event. Once a person is a Christian, he is 100% Christian. There is

essentially (not required by the structure of the category) nothing more for him to acquire. He might grow spiritually, but this is not an essential part of what it means to be a Christian.

BOUNDED



CENTERED

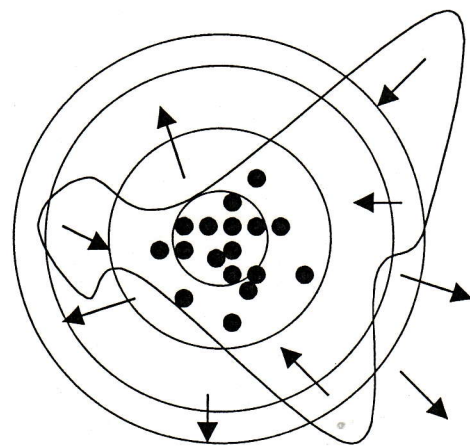


Figure 2. Bounded and Centered Sets

Let us return, for a moment, to Papayya. If we think of *Christian* as a bounded set, we must decide what are the definitive characteristics that set a Christian apart from a non-Christian. We may do so in terms of belief in certain essential doctrines. But here we face a dilemma. If we reduce these to so simple a set that we can say Papayya has truly become a Christian (that he has acquired *all* of the beliefs necessary to become a Christian), are we not in danger of settling for cheap grace? Furthermore, how do we handle the fact that Papayya views the doctrines we do require in different thought forms? Must these be corrected before we are convinced that he is a real Christian?

On the other hand, if we raise the basic requirements for being a Christian too high, we make it impossible for Papayya to become a Christian that night, or that year—for it would take more than a year of careful teaching before he could begin to understand our theological framework.

We face a similar problem in using changes in behavior to define a Christian. There will be changes in Papayya, to be sure, but many of them will not take place immediately. We may see little in the way of a dramatic change by tomorrow. Is he then not a Christian?

3. *Centered sets:*

Could it be that our problem with deciding whether Papayya is or is not a Christian has to do with the way we form our mental category *Christian*? But there are other ways to form categories. A second way is to form centered sets. A centered set has the following characteristics:

a. It is created by defining a center, and the relationship of things to that center (see Figure 2). Some things may be far from the center, but they are moving *towards* the center, therefore, they are part of the centered set. On the other hand, some objects may be near the center but are moving away from it, so they are not a part of the set. The set is made up of all objects moving towards the center.

b. While the centered set does not place the primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear division between things moving in and those moving out. An object either belongs to a set or it does not. The set focuses upon the *center* and the boundary emerges when the center and the movement of the objects has been defined. There is no great need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set. The boundary *is* so long as the center is clear.

c. Centered sets reflect variation within a category. While there is a clear distinction between things moving in and those moving out,⁴ the objects within the set are not categorically uniform. Some may be near the center and others far from it, even though all are moving towards the center. Each object must be considered individually. It is not reduced to a single common uniformity within the category.

d. Centered sets are dynamic sets. Two types of movements are essential parts of their structure. First, it is possible to change direction—to turn from moving away to moving towards the center, from being outside to being inside the set. Second, because all objects are seen in constant motion, they are moving, fast or slowly, towards or away from the center.

Something is always happening to an object. It is never static.

Illustrations of centered sets are harder to come by in English, for English sees the world largely in terms of bounded sets. One example is a magnetic field in which particles are in motion. Electrons are those particles which are drawn towards the positive magnetic pole, and protons are those attracted by the negative pole.

4. "*Christian*" as a centered set:

How would the concept *Christian* look if we were to define it as a centered set?

a. A Christian would be defined in terms of a center—in terms of who is God. The critical question is, to whom does the person offer his worship and allegiance? This would be judged, in part, by the direction a person faces and moves. A Christian has Christ as his God. Christ is his center if he moves towards Christ—if he seeks to know and follow after Christ.

From the nature of the centered set, it should be clear that it is possible that there are those near the center who know a great deal about Christ, theology, and the Church, but who are moving away from the center. These are the Pharisees. On the other hand, there are those who are at a distance—who know little about Christ—but they may be Christians for they have made Christ their Lord. He is the center around which their life revolves.

b. There is a clear division between being a Christian and not being a Christian. The boundary is there. But there is less stress on maintaining the boundary in order to preserve the existence and purity of the category, the

body of believers. There is less need to play boundary games and to institutionally exclude those who are not truly Christian. Rather, the focus is on the center and of pointing people to that center.

c. There is a recognition of variation among Christians. Some are closer to Christ in their knowledge and maturity, others have only a little knowledge and need to grow. But all are Christian, and all are called to move even closer to Christ.

By recognizing variance, the centered set avoids the dilemma of offering cheap grace to make it possible for the ignorant and the gross sinners to become Christians without lengthy periods of training and testing. Growth after conversion is an intrinsic part of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is not a finished product the moment he is converted.

Two important dynamics are recognized. First, there is conversion, which in a centered set means that the person has turned around. He has left another center or god and has made Christ his center. This is a definite event—a change in the God in whom he places his faith.⁵

But, by definition, growth is an equally essential part of being a Christian. Having turned around, one must continue to move towards the center. There is no static state. Conversion is not the end, it is the beginning. We need evangelism to bring people to Christ, but we must also think about the rest of their lives. We must think in terms of bringing them to Christian maturity in terms of their knowledge of Christ and their growth in Christlikeness. We must also think of the body of believers in terms of their growth over the centuries.

⁶In centered set terms, one might say that each decision moves a person towards or away from Christ, but that a person remains a Christian so long as he is faced towards Christ. Whether he can or cannot turn back to face away, and therefore lose his position as a Christian, is a theological issue and is not determined by the structure of the category itself.

It is interesting to note that the independent church movements in India, such as Bhakt Singh, organize themselves in terms of centered sets. They have only loosely defined, or no church membership, and give leadership to a few elders at the center.

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