Engaging Difference: A Pivot in Conversion and Mission
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As a movement from one religious affiliation to another, religious conversion involves an encounter with difference – spiritual, theological, scriptural difference, and typically an encounter with a different human community, with distinctive social and ethnic traditions. Individual and group shifts in religious affiliation are never uniform in content or intensity, for prior cultural and religious experience produce an infinite range of religious expression through enculturation and contextualization. Nevertheless, encountering and embracing difference is inherent in conversion.

Mission is ministry in the dimension of difference – cultural, linguistic, social, ethnic or religious difference, or any combination of these. When Christians reach out to encounter and form community with individuals and communities sociologically different from their own they are on mission. Thus gospel proclamation to non-Christian communities is intrinsically and obviously missional. Euro-American racism and imperialism sometimes so distorted mission's encounter with difference that western missiology in recent decades has sought to background difference in favor or human commonality, but engaging difference remains a defining distinctive of mission.

This paper inter-relates the difference factor in conversion and the difference factor in mission in several ways: Missioners' theology of religions must honor both difference and commonality. Missioners and potential converts need dialogue that discerns nuances of difference and commonality. Deepened self-understanding is a particular fruit of engaging difference for both converts and missioners – as both have exemplified historically. Post-modern philosophy's suggestion that difference is ontologically as well as epistemologically prior to similarity illuminates the transformational role of difference in mission and conversion.