

[The J.R. Ewing Syndrome](#)

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The J.R. Ewing Syndrome

Television and movies struggle mightily to be dramatic, humorous, tragic, colorful, sexy and outrageous. Video is modern man's moving canvas; like a painting, it can mimic but never match the real thing - life.

But perhaps it can help us interpret experience, find useful analogies, study the human condition. In fact, it did just that last night. As we pondered the front page story, seeking ways to explain the Hindu's profound concerns to the global Catholic community, our analogy appeared on the screen. It was J.R. Ewing. That's right, pardner, Dallas' powerful, scheming oil baron came to our rescue. This deserves a little explanation.

In this issue we tackled the confrontation of Catholic doctrine and Hindu dharma. Avoiding a temptation to replay history's horrors (high ratings, but not family viewing), the staff focused a journalistic lens on the simple, contemporary issue of Catholic adoption of Hindu spiritual forms and disciplines. Research deepened and two things became clear. First, Catholics are struggling with the issue on their side, too. Almost every Catholic university has a special faculty member or even full department dedicated to Asian Studies; they teach Hinduism and Buddhism to students and theologians. They told us they love India and are genuinely drawn toward Eastern spirituality, finding its disciplines more profound, more effective.

Second, the Church still clings to the belief that the salvation of every soul on earth depends on Christ and on baptism in its cathedrals and by its priests. A few good Christians might get through, but God help Buddhists, Hindus, Shintoists, Muslims and free thinkers. This belief is so powerful, so compelling, so tenaciously held that it, all alone, destroys every effort of the Catholics to tolerate (I mean accept and leave alone, not merely endure) another culture's spiritual heritage. It is the motive upon which all priests, nuns and bishops act; it is the stone upon which all efforts at reconciliation are built. This "there is one way" consciousness is not unique to Catholics. Fundamental Christians hold it even more dearly, as do

Muslims. There are, at last count, 30,000 Christian and Islamic denominations each preaching a slightly different and singularly salvific path. This belief is the "J.R. Ewing Syndrome."

Think about it. J.R. has one goal in life - to own the entire Ewing Oil Company and dominate the industry. Everything he does and says serves that desire. When he shakes a banker's hand, 60 million viewers know his intent - to own Ewing Oil. When he asks his brother Bobby to cooperate in some venture, he's after Bobby's shares. When he confesses to wifely Su Ellen that, yes, he used to be a dirty dealer and a poor sport but is now a good ol' boy whom she should love and trust, he's up to something. You can be sure.

Yet time and again family, friends, bankers and a hopeful viewer or two get suckered by that winning smile and golden tongue. A moment's kindness and they embrace him, say they knew he would come around one day. Then, zap, J.R. nails them when their back is turned. It's not his fault. It's an illness. J.R. is driven by the need to own it all. He will do anything and say anything (yes, even be nice) if it will get him Ewing Oil.

The Catholic Church suffers from a particularly virulent religious strain of the J.R. Ewing Syndrome. It wants to own the company - which in this case is religion. Deep down, it hopes for a day when all men in all cultures will endorse its truths, worship at its altars, accept its Savior and enter its heaven. Catholics truly believe that they have a God-given duty to accomplish this. Their faith is unique, it is inherently better. For the good of humanity they do this, not for themselves; no doubt J.R. is equally certain that the company will be better off with him at the helm. Never mind that Bobby will have to go, that Pam and Ray will suffer personal losses, that even his mother, Miss Ellie, will lose her rightful legacy.

I know what you're thinking, "These editors are living in the past. Sure, those things used to be so. But this is the 21st century. All men want to be brothers. It's different today, right?" Wrong. In Madras about three years back, local sisters were caught in a little ruse. It seems they took busloads of Hindu children to a popular snake farm every weekend. Oddly, the bus always broke down. The nuns would fuss and fail to get it started, and ask the kids to pray, "First, let's pray to Ganesha, the Hindu elephant God." No results. Poor children. They might miss the snakes. "Well, let's all kneel and pray to Jesus for help." Lo, the bus started! Cheers, and a quiet voice assuring them, "You see, Jesus is more powerful. He loves you all."

Last week on our island, a devout banquet manager invited two neighbors into his shrine room. One of them, a missionary, immediately bellowed, "You're evil. You're going to hell. I see Satan in your eyes." Turning all deity pictures to the wall, he urged the man to accept Jesus Christ and abandon his Hindu heresies. Also last week a correspondent sent us photographs from a seminary in South India. They showed a giant statue of Christ, his two feet standing upon and completely covering the Indian sub-continent as sari- and dhoti-clad devotees worshipped him. Wrote our researcher, "This is the dream of present-day Christians, the whole of India must be Christianized."

No one wants a true brotherhood of believers more than the Hindu, but such things must cease. Let Catholics tend their own flock as they wish. All the Hindu asks is to be left alone to follow his dharma, to sing his holy hymns, to raise his children as he deems fit, to seek his God in the way his scriptures and saints have revealed. The Hindu's spiritual heritage is priceless to him. He loves it as dearly as the Christian loves his, and he intends to protect and preserve it. He has never imposed himself in Rome; and he doesn't want Rome to impose itself in Madras.

Listen to a Tamil Catholic priest recently describing his Indian students, "Some of them may never become good Catholics, but after my classes they will never be good Hindus." Sound like J.R.? If a real family of man is ever to emerge on this earth (barring the terrible possibility that some Muslim, Christian or Hindu denomination succeeds in eradicating all other spiritual expressions), one in which all men are free to believe or doubt as they choose, then mankind must eradicate the J.R. Ewing Syndrome from religion. Anyone else who clings to the "my way is the only way" doctrine, must relinquish it forever. To use our analogy, as long as J.R. wants the whole company, his family and friends can never really trust him, never believe the things he says. Such ingenuous trust could be their destruction.

Christians have inherited a mischievous, peccant past. But the future could be different. After all, actor Larry Hagman (J.R.) meditates every morning and observes silence on Fridays! Let us see if Christian charity can be done purely and without a motive to convert. Let us see if the sisters can feed and clothe the poor Hindu, knowing he will be a stronger, healthier Hindu (not silently wishing he will stop wearing a tilak and give up beliefs in karma and reincarnation). Let us watch their schools educate our children, knowing their intellectual powers will strengthen and enrich the Sanatana Dharma. Let us welcome them to give selflessly, to desist from all expansionism, all proselytizing outside their church, knowing we will never sell them the family store. That is true charity. Anything less is business.

Will J.R. see the error of his ways and change? Will he devise a plot to usurp Ewing Oil Company? Tune in next week...