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COMMENTARY

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Maybe it's time we regard aggressive conversion as a human rights violation

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The following article was excerpted from Rajiv Malhotra's speech given at a conference, "Human Rights and Religion," at Cornell University, November 8, 2000, in Ithaca, New York.

Numerous speakers spoke about human rights problems related to White Supremacy groups, but do we have the courage to examine the Christian Supremacy groups, often camouflaged as proselytizers? We heard condemnations of hate speech, but do we exempt hate speech when it is done in the name of God, quoted from a sacred book? The following phrases are commonly used by proselytizers in describing their non-Christian target prospects: "sinners," "condemned," "damned," "heathen," "pagan," etc. If it were not done under the cover of religion, would this not have been

declared as hate speech? Does such speech, even if disguised, generate communal tension? Is this responsible for negative episodes in India between Hindus and Christians who coexisted peacefully for centuries before the arrival of the proselytizers? In America's tapestry of pluralistic faiths, Hindus are among one's classmates, neighbors and coworkers. Might this language lead to social problems in the future? Does it violate the UN Human Rights provision that guarantees "dignity" to all people as a basic human right?

Going against proselytizing is not an attack against Christianity, as many Christians do not believe in proselytizing. Throughout its history, proselytizing has been a weapon for imperialism. It has never been friendly to the indigenous, be it in Africa, America, Asia or even Europe itself. Gandhi confirmed: "I consider Western Christianity in its practical working a negation of Christ's Christianity. I cannot conceive Jesus, if he was living in flesh in our midst, approving of modern Christian organizations, public worship or ministry."

Religions are often becoming commercial "brands" competing for market share, selling both God's love and insurance from hell. Islam, Christianity and the dogma of Marxism have unquenchable thirsts for quantitative expansion, simply because they hanker after political

power and materialistic objectives. In North India, the Southern Baptists alone have 4,700 workers, 15,000 career missionaries, 50,000 volunteers, 1,000 new college graduates per year with an average two-year length of service. In total, there are estimated to be 100,000 career Christian missionaries in India, a size several times the sales force of the largest Indian corporations.

While a Hindu may participate in Christian activities or beliefs without violating Hinduism, the reverse is untrue. By joining Christianity under the false expectation that it would not affect his Hindu faith, he gradually begins to get pressured by his newly-adopted Christian faith from keeping his Hindu identity or practices. Eventually, this leads to social and cultural alienation from his roots. Hence, the idea of dual religious affiliation, while fine for a Hindu, is a one-way street, and has become a political ploy for Christians to convert those who wish to retain Hindu practices. For example, in South India, Catholic priests dress up like Hindu swamis, call their organizations ashrams and the preachers "gurus." But they are actively engaged in surreptitious conversion. Their Hindu dress is not to honor Hindu traditions but to make Christianity more familiar. Bharata Natayam dance is being taught in Christian schools in South India, with Christian symbols gradually replacing Hindu ones.

Harmony among the religions of the world is unachievable as long as some of them see others as competitors, even in the holy game of soul saving. Mere tolerance is simply external and fails to address internalized prejudice. What is lacking is respect.

There is no central authority to control people's personal beliefs in Hinduism, which respects many paths. There are many God-Truths, but these are merely representations by different people of a single God-Truth. This has given rise to hundreds of sects and subsects within Hinduism, which have learned to coexist. Hindus never target anyone for conversion, so the motive for hatred is not there. Rather, Hindus are challenging Christian prejudices against Hindus. It is the general Muslim view that Hindus are idolators, polytheists and kafirs and doomed in the eyes of Allah. Hindus have no such doctrines about Islam. Hindu dislike of Christianity and Islam is largely a backlash against efforts to convert them.

In Hinduism, there is no concept similar to Christian martyrdom or Islamic jihad. The most important and revered historical figures of Hinduism were not martyrs. Spirituality is not about fighting someone or some religion. There is no discussion of other religions in Hindu scriptures, no campaigns against "false gods." Comparative religion is not of much interest to Hindus,

as they do not see religion through competitive or predatory eyes. Christians, on the other hand, go out of their way to control positions in academics, to research and to teach about Hinduism, as a sort of competitor intelligence gathering which seeks hegemony.

The Dalai Lama recommends a moratorium on proselytizing in order to give cooperative pluralism a chance. Likewise, Gandhi wrote: "If I had the power and could legislate, I would stop all proselytizing."

Conversion belongs to the times of colonialism. No society has advanced, spiritually or materially, by converting from one faith to another. It can be proven that the economic progress in Europe happened only when the hold of the Vatican was reduced. When Christianity accepts the right of other people to follow their own beliefs and creeds, then only will Jesus Christ's spirit truly radiate in the world.

Every marketing company, despite its firm belief that it has the "best" or even only "true" product, must comply with norms of fair competition. Organized religion must be accepted as a field of competing worldviews, with economic and political interests. There must exist certain ethics of "marketing" religion, and rules of fair competition. A level playing field with responsibilities would raise standards of religious promotion and reduce social tensions. To formulate these standards, I pose

the following questions. Which freedom is more important freedom "from" hatred, or freedom "to" hate?

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