One Day My Religion Will Rule the World
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EDITORIAL

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It's called triumphalism, and it seems that almost nobody is immune from its conceits

the Editor

Harvard University's groundbreaking project on religious pluralism in America [see "Stirring Up the Melting Pot" in this issue] is a potent sign of our multicultural times. To some it is a joyous sign, a welcome reconciliation in which past hatreds are being hammered into present understandings. To many it is a frightful omen, a most unwelcome misapprehension that will dilute and destroy Christianity's historic dominance in the United States. Hindus, of course, tend to side with the first view. In fact, most Americans do. But by all means not all.

Those who stand opposed to Harvard's celebration of religious differences are justifiably worried. Within a few short decades, the religious rainbow in America has grown from a basic pallet of red, white and blue--Protestant, Catholic and Jewish--to a dozen or more colors with many subtle hues between. As new pigments are added, basic colors are both enriched and diluted. That dilution worries those who love plain red. They don't want pink or rose. They may detest cerise, vermilion and

maroon. While we see it as a more colorful world, they are seeing red.

And for good cause. Consider Newsweek's December 15 cover which asked, "Whose Faith for the Kids? Mixed Marriages, Holidays and Hard Choices." The story reveals a growing trend for people to marry outside their born religion, and what happens to the children raised in a multi-faith home. In describing how interfaith marriages are "creating, in effect, a new form of religious identification in America, analogous to the 'mixed race' category," the story tells of Dilip Visvanath and Carmen Guerra, two doctors raised in New York City. They were married at a Hindu temple in Queens on Friday night, and again by her Catholic priest the following morning in Manhattan. Speaking of their hoped-for children, Dilip said, "We want to expose them to both religions."

Similarly, Muslims are marrying Mormons, Jews are espousing Episcopalians and Buddhists are wedding Jains. How profoundly is this affecting these communities? Very. Newsweek cites several studies which conclude that today 50% of all American Jews marry partners of other faiths, as do 21% of Catholics, 30% of Mormons and 40% of Muslims. Hindus have no such statistics, but certainly they would be comparable.

Even with all this mixing and mingling of isms, America is not freed of religious conflicts, and the rest of the world has yet to experience the full impact of a free-flow of peoples and their creeds. In many hearts and nations religious triumphalism is still the flavor of choice. What is triumphalism? Prof. Durwood

Foster of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, defines it as the belief which "assumes the primacy of one's own values and the right to rule others." It is the hope that my religion will one day rule all others, that it will take over the world, eliminate lesser dogmas, and reign as the global mega-faith. Many wish this in their hearts, though they may not openly speak of it outside their own circles. Triumphalism is found in all religious communities. For the religious right in many spiritual traditions, it is a mantra: "We shall overcome. Our God will be the judge of all who worship at lesser altars. This is our mission on Earth, our prayer and promise." Ahem!

The definition of triumph derives from a military parade for Roman conquerors returning from war. The qualification was simple--he had to have won a battle in which at least 5,000 enemies were killed. That sense of conquest abides in the word as applied to religion, though the battlefield now is more in people's hearts and minds. Religious leaders still perceive the struggle between faiths in warlike terms, their missions as campaigns, their gains as conquests, their losses as being besieged. Evangelists still love to sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers!"

Lest you find yourself taking refuge in the fact that not all faiths think in such bellicose terms, ponder this. On the World Wide Web this month you can follow an internal debate in the Bahai faith about triumphalism. That's right, Bahai, one of the most embracing and tolerant faiths in existence, one which has suffered the most harmful hubris of which triumphalism is capable, is itself wrestling with the notion that it may become the world religion of the future. If a small and tolerant religion like Bahai can dream such triumphal dreams, imagine what

nightmares larger faiths are capable of. And don't get too smug. Even our own Hinduism is not exempt, though we may be masters of the subtler martial arts. While accepting all faiths, Hindus also take a kind of perverse pride in our universalism, noting--even when we don't say it--that our religion teaches the principle of "Truth is one, paths are many" or "Yoga's light illumines all religions." This being true, all faiths are part of the Sanatana Dharma. So, in a sense, all are following our path, right? It's a philosophical triumphalism, and though we don't apply it to convert and condemn, we apply it nonetheless.

Christians appear to be discovering the dangers of triumphalism, and there are signs that a wiser view is being adopted. Read From Triumphalism to Maturity by Harvard's Donald A. Carson. Whenever we feel the flush of our ancientness and our all-embracingness, we can recall that is only our view and give honor to others' ways. That said, we need not accept the argument, still common in the Abrahamic faiths, that their scriptures commission them to evangelize the Earth, and since we claim to respect their faith we must accept their mission. We must do no such thing. Instead, we can remind them of the simple rule of law taught in first-year torts classes: Your right to swing your arms freely ends at my nose.