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Society

Predatory Proselytism

The common concept of religious freedom fails to embrace the right to freedom from religious intrusion and exploitation. Let's change that.

By Padma Kuppa

I am fortunate to be able to visit my family in India often--returning to the chaotic comfort that only one's family can provide, and re-connecting with the land of ancient rishis. But on recent visits I have noticed a marked increase in predatory proselytism.

Predatory proselytism is a term we use at the [Hindu American Foundation](#) to describe various unethical methods used in the attempt to gain converts. An ethical conversion is born of genuine faith, belief, study and/or religious experience that creates a true commitment to the new faith.

Several unethical, predatory conversion strategies are commonly employed in India and elsewhere. One such method is material enticement, in which humanitarian aid or economic, educational, medical or social assistance is offered on condition that the person converts. Another is denigration of the person's own religion in order to make the new religion appear superior. A third unethical, predatory method is the promotion of bigotry--knowingly and intentionally promoting religious hatred and even violence. Predatory proselytization tears apart the fabric of the communities where it occurs and has led to the annihilation of cultures.

Consider the case of the watchman and his family in my parents' apartment

building in Hyderabad. When their young daughter was ill, they obtained medical assistance through the local church. Unfortunately, the assistance from this church (which has ties to the US) came with strings attached: they were asked to convert to Christianity. Not having other means to obtain treatment for their daughter, they complied. And now the church people come every Christmas season to be certain they are still Christian--the visible symbol being a lighted star hung over their home. Seethamma continues to wear her traditional sari, her mangala sutra (the Hindu symbol of marriage) and the red mark of kumkum on her forehead; but her daughters now wear Western clothing, seeking to be more like the Christians who converted them.

The family can still use their Hindu names, because they have not been baptized--yet. But the pressure is on: If they want the additional benefits enjoyed by Naomi, a neighbor who has been baptized, they must completely abandon their names, the festivities that link the community together, all the practices they have known since childhood, and even their understanding of the big questions in life. Seethamma and her family participate surreptitiously in the neighborhood celebrations of the major Hindu holy days such as Ganesh Chaturthi and Dasara, but Naomi dares not even try. In order to receive her monthly allowance, she receives visits from the church people to ensure she has not strayed from the Christian path and is not involved in Hindu festivities with her neighbors and friends.

Stories like these abound worldwide. In fact, the term "rice Christian" was coined to refer to people who convert to Christianity in order to survive, rather than from a genuine desire to embrace the Christian faith: Historically in Asia, some missionaries offered rice and other food items to people who agreed to convert to Christianity. This questionable strategy and other missionary practices are documented in books such as Arun Shourie's *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, Their Designs, Their Claims* and Iain Buchanan's *Armies of God: A Study in Militant Christianity*.

A Fundamental Human Right

The American Constitution, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the laws of most free nations declare religious freedom to be a fundamental human right. But this right stands compromised for billions around the world. Despite some efforts by the international community, the common application of the term gives the freedom to proselytize but does not recognize the right to continue in one's own tradition, free from predatory proselytism, religious intrusion and exploitation. In this way, current religious freedom policies tilt the scales of power in favor of

exclusivist faiths, to the detriment of pluralist and non-exclusivist traditions. This imbalance has proven historically to foster interreligious tensions and violent conflict, religious imperialism and supremacy, terrorism and, ultimately, the annihilation of peoples, cultures and traditions that embrace pluralism.

Perspectives of Many Faiths

Some American Christian theologians, concerned with issues of religious freedom, diversity and proselytism, agree that the understanding of religious freedom needs to change. Rev. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, former president of the United Church of Christ's Chicago Theological Seminary, points out that religious freedom is perceived as a right in some parts of the world, but is a matter of identity in others. Rev. W. Eugene March, a Presbyterian and Old Testament scholar, advocates "the understanding and practice of genuine tolerance founded upon a positive appreciation for God's providential gift of religious pluralism" in his book, *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love: A Biblical Case for Religious Diversity*. Rev. Gwynne Guibord, the Officer of Ecumenical and Interreligious Concerns for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, led the denunciation of historical and ongoing proselytism efforts by Christian missionaries as counterproductive to religious harmony.

A Hindu axiom is "Ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanti"--"Truth is one, sages describe it variously" (Rig Veda 1.164.46). This understanding enables individuals to acknowledge that more than one path exists and that no one belief system or spiritual path is best for all. Hindu scriptures provide a set of blueprints for living harmoniously and synthesizing apparently opposing viewpoints--dvaita/advaita, nirguna/saguna Brahman, polytheism/monotheism. This framework is becoming increasingly more important as division and polarization rise at local, national and global levels.

While some people from other faith traditions share our belief in pluralism, others adamantly oppose it. There is little ground for communication when my friend Rev. Bob Cornwall tells me that for him and other Christians, "To not share one's faith with the intent to convert is an abdication of one's duty, and thus evil." When my colleague in interfaith work Rev. Dan Buttry, a Global Peace Consultant for the evangelical American Baptist Church, speaks against the violence that occurs when Hindus encounter evangelicals in Orissa and other parts of India, it is difficult to reply without becoming either accusatory or defensive. And I was speechless on hearing of my mother's conversation with a 17-year-old from Arkansas who barely knows the world, but is in Hyderabad to "save souls."

I ask such people to imagine someone trying to build a non-Roman Catholic church in the Vatican. A parallel situation actually happened several years ago: there was an application to build a Christian church in the Tirumala Hills, the home of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam and the Sri Venkateswara Temple, a shrine sacred to millions of Hindus around the world.

Scope of Modern Proselytism

Predatory proselytism fractures nations. In places like East Timor, Christians have converted people from their native traditions and then carved out new countries. In Northeast India and elsewhere, Christians have achieved or are near achieving a majority and are pushing toward splitting off as a new nation. When India sought to defend against unethical tactics by passing its Anti-Fraudulent Conversion Laws, it came under fire. Americans reacted by placing India on the annual Watch List of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). India, of course, is the birthplace of four major religions--Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism; it is home to the third largest Muslim population in the world; and it has always provided safe haven to the Jewish people. Indeed, India welcomes all who are willing to respect others' beliefs and ways of life. Policy makers throughout the Western world should consider the context when questioning religious freedom in a country like India, where Hinduism has survived the onslaught of aggressive, supremacist faiths and nurtured religious pluralism.

Consider the plight of those offered "conditional help" in South India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, and later in Haiti after the earthquake. In Aceh, Indonesia, missionaries from the Virginia-based organization WorldHelp reported that the catastrophe "provided entrance to the gospel" and that by placing tsunami orphans in a Christian home "their faith in Christ could become the foothold to reach the Aceh people." (This statement was later removed from their website.) In Haiti, tensions between religious groups have increased after the 2010 earthquake, since much of the desperately needed aid was provided by evangelical groups.

This intimidation and exploitation of the most vulnerable segments of society is primarily rooted today in a surge of international conversion campaigns. In 2010 alone, Houston-based Central India Christian Mission proselytized to over 320,000 people and "converted" more than 19,600 in Central India. In October 2010, Joyce Meyer Ministries conducted a one-week medical outreach in Kolkata: over 2,200 people were treated and over 1,300 souls were "saved." At Source Light Ministries, 25 child evangelists and 100 "church planters" are trained monthly (www.sourcelight.org/news/).

Grand Rapids-based Mission India argues that in India "superstition and idol worship have an iron grip--there is no forgiveness or joy." Such denigration of one's faith has a long-term impact on the psyche. It cuts families apart, like Edi's family, whose story is narrated here: bit.ly/edis-secret-prayer. Moreover, the claim is false--kshama (forgiveness) and ananda (joy) are alive and well in India. But that doesn't matter to the missionaries; they're busy teaching English, raising money and counting converts.

Such predatory proselytism and the resulting unethical conversions that have been carried out for centuries around the world can no longer be ignored and must be prosecuted. Conversion campaigns, the majority of which are funded by American, Australian, South Korean and European faith-based organizations, deny respect, dignity and religious freedom to a vast majority of the world's people. More alarmingly, they are fostering deep and open conflict throughout the world. These campaigns are carried out by private citizens, but the diplomatic responsibility rests on the shoulders of the nations to which these individuals and organizations belong--as should the costs of dealing with the resulting conflicts.

These trends and issues are addressed thoroughly in the Hindu American Foundation's upcoming report on predatory proselytism and pluralism. We want to enable substantive policy dialogue and provide recommendations, with take-aways for individuals and communities. Here in the US, we invite support and encourage efforts to provide guidance for Hindu families in dealing with invasive initiatives like Campus Crusade for Christ, campaigns to convert the Bhutanese refugees living in various metro areas and other instances where groups seek to convert those in need through unethical means. We hope to reframe the dialog so that conversion efforts involving an imbalance of power are recognized as predatory proselytism, to positively impact the understanding of religious freedom and to promote religious diversity. We have reined in sexual harrassment and school bullying. Let's curtail predatory proselytism.

Read the Hindu American Foundation's "policy brief on predatory proselytization and pluralism" at bit.ly/haf-predpros

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