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# Re-imagining Religious Freedom

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need to examine the distinctions between two kinds of traditions that are classified as “religion.” In particular, there is a distinction between what African scholar Makau Mutua calls “proselytizing universalist faiths”<sup>1</sup> and other human traditions. Balgangadhara<sup>2</sup> argues in detail that the concept of religion exemplified by the Abrahamic faiths is in an entirely different category than those of the other traditions. Differences in conceptions of religious freedom thus arise from the differences in category.

Here is what Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, the last of the pagan prefects of Rome, when faced with official Christian persecution of the ancient Roman traditions, had to say in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.:

“Grant, I beg you, that what in our youth we took over from our fathers, we may in our old age hand to posterity??. The love of established practice is a powerful sentiment ... Everyone has his own customs, his own religious practices; the divine mind has assigned to different cities different religions to be their guardians. ... And so we ask for peace for the gods of our fathers, for the gods of our native land. It is reasonable that whatever each of us worships is really to be considered one and the same. ... What does it matter what practical system we adopt in our search for truth? Not by one avenue only can we arrive at so tremendous a secret.”<sup>3</sup>

Let us zoom forward a few thousand years, to another continent, the “New World” of the Americas. The chief of a Native American tribe

offered this reply to a Christian missionary’s proselytizing sermon:

“The Almighty, for any thing we know, may have communicated himself to different races of people in a different manner. Some say they have the will of God in writing; be it so, their revelation has no advantage above ours, since both are equally sufficient to save, or the end of the revelation would be frustrated ... the difference can only lay in the mode of communication.”<sup>4</sup>

The remonstrances of the Native American tribes were, unfortunately, insufficient to save their traditions from assault by those that claimed theirs was the only true way. Regis Pecob, Member of the Pueblo Tribal Council presented the following testimony, included in the Hearings on Religious Freedom before the US Congress in 1994.<sup>5</sup>

“For the Pueblo, this long road began with the efforts of the Spanish to forcibly impose Catholicism and destroy our traditional spiritual beliefs. We survived that campaign only at great human cost—in torture, in murder, in mutilation, in the destruction of whole communities.”

He quoted further a 1924 declaration of the Pueblos:

“We have met because our most fundamental right of religious liberty is threatened. ... the religious beliefs and ceremonies and forms of prayer of each of our Pueblos are as old as the world and they are holy. ... *To pass this religion*, with hidden sacred knowledge and its many forms of prayer, *on to our children*, is our

The doctrine of religious freedom is enshrined in the UN charter under the Declaration of Universal Human Rights and also in article 25 of the Indian constitution. Both these declarations state that the right to “change” one’s religion is a universal human right. The Indian constitution goes further by including the right to “propagate” one’s religion as a fundamental right.

Since the right to “change” and to “propagate” religion is given to all individuals it is assumed to be universal, fair and neutral. However, there are at least two distinct viewpoints that come from different types of religious traditions. Religious freedom, as currently defined, privileges one view of religion over others. This privileging, enshrined in law, has real-world implications. It is proposed that more balanced definitions of religious freedom would better promote religious harmony and religious diversity.

## Pagans’ View of Religion

“What is religion?” is a question that scholars still actively debate. For understanding religious freedom we

supreme duty to our ancestors and to our own hearts and to the God whom we know. *Our religion is a true religion, and it is our way of life.* We must now tell how our religious freedom is threatened and denied to us.” [emphasis added]

Let us now consider a place far removed from the Americas.

“I came to the conclusion long ago that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them, and whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism. So we can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu. But our innermost prayer should be a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian.”<sup>6</sup>

This is Gandhi writing in *Young India* in 1928.

Oddly enough, none of these peoples considered defining religious freedom as the freedom to *change* their religion. Quite the contrary. For them religion constituted the traditions and practices handed down by their ancestors. In this view it is equally absurd for someone to discard these traditions to adopt someone else’s religion as it would be to change one’s ancestors for someone else’s. Similar ideas of “religion” are found in the many native communities in India and throughout the world. If all people have their traditions and each is valid for them, why would one want to cause someone else to change? Indeed the freedom they sought was precisely the opposite – the right to pass on their traditions onto their children without interference and *without* being subjected to organised campaigns to get them to change.

### The Missionary Religions

Let us now examine some quotes with a different perspective on this issue.

The International Mission Board’s page on “Mobilization for Missions” opens with the following quote:



“Declare his (God’s) glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people.” Psalm 96:3 God wants Southern Baptists as a people to mobilize vast resources for reaching all people groups for Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> [Emphasis in original]

The International Mission Board is very clear in its goals – its stated vision is to “to lead Southern Baptists to be on mission with God to bring all the peoples of the world (‘panta ta ethne’) to saving faith in Jesus Christ.” This vision is apparently authorised by no less than God himself:

“We must realize that this is not our mission; however, it is God’s mission, and He has called us as His people to join Him in fulfilling that mission.”

Their aims are nothing short of the apocalyptic end of the world. As their documents proclaim:

“It is a vision that will be fulfilled, for Jesus said in Matthew 24:14, “The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a witness to every nation and then the end will come.”

Is this some fringe missionary group? Hardly. The International Mission Board is an entity of the influential Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention in the United States was formed in 1845 mainly to create mission boards. It boasts of over 16 million members and runs 48 Baptist Colleges and Universities. It counts

several past United States’ Presidents among its members and its revenues from member contributions top \$9 billion annually, in league with the largest corporations. President George W. Bush has addressed each of the Convention’s last four annual meetings.

The Baptists, however, do not view their missionary programme as a programme against religious liberty. On the contrary, they claim that “Religious freedom was a distinctively Baptist contribution as formulated in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution”<sup>8</sup>. The Baptist views on religious freedom include “the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference Constitution.

### A Question of Choice?

The secular idea of the freedom of religion, born of the European experience with religion, presumes that the right to belief and the change of belief without restriction or favour from the government is sufficient for religious liberty. In effect, it creates a competitive marketplace of religious belief. This idea of a competitive marketplace of religion is, however, not a universal idea, but limited to particular faiths. Thus these faiths are asymmetrically equipped to compete in this marketplace since others do not view religion as a competitive endeavor in a similar way. As a result the idea of “free choice” in this marketplace becomes highly asymmetrical in practice, favouring imperialistic proselytising creeds over local traditions.

### Competitive Religions

The first asymmetry is the asymmetry of doctrines. For most of the native traditions the idea of preaching to others to get them to abandon their traditions and follow someone else’s is absurd. For the proselytising creeds, to do so is a religious imperative, central to their faith.

The charter of World Evangelism is justified using Biblical quotes. “Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations” reads the quote attributed to Jesus on the Joshua Project website.<sup>9</sup> This task is taken seriously and literally. The evangelical Joshua Project website’s charter is “Bringing Definition to the Unfinished Task.” The Joshua Project was born out of the AD 2000<sup>10</sup> movement with the goal to “plant a Church” amongst every people group by the year 2000. The co-chairman and godfather of the movement is the evangelist Billy Graham whom President George W. Bush credits for his “born-again” conversion. In 1995 the movement sponsored the Global Consultation on World Evangelization in Seoul, South Korea where “4,000 Christian leaders from 186 countries, including India, gathered to draw up secret and covert (world) evangelical plans.”<sup>11</sup>

Hundreds of seminaries and missionary colleges exist to teach strategies for evangelisation—what works, what does not work, how to prepare, how to leverage social and economic problems and issues, how to create multi-media marketing campaigns complete with personal customer testimonials and how to influence the media. The evangelicals are, in their own words, “mobilized for mission”, to “make disciples of every nation.”

The “Sonar” community of India recently got prime billing in the “prayer” site of the International Mission Board.

“Did you know that the Sonar people of Maharashtra, India, are the primary crafters of gold and silver Hindu idols? These idols are the most powerful stronghold that Satan has upon the Hindu worshippers in India and around the world. When the Sonar people embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, the subsequent change in their livelihood could have a huge ripple effect in the world of Hinduism. As

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one international Christian worker said, “When we reach the Sonar with the gospel, we will see the collapse of Hinduism.” Pray that the gospel would flow through and permeate the Sonar culture like molten silver fills a mold.”<sup>12</sup>

The idea that people would pray for the collapse of other religious traditions, branded as Satanic, highlights the distinction of doctrine between the two kinds of traditions.

For one side, that holds the views “to each their own” religion is not seen as a competitive enterprise, far less a war for outright global monopoly. They have not asked for this war. Many are not even aware that they are at war till it comes to their doorstep. Non-Abrahamic traditions are neither tolerant nor intolerant towards other traditions. They are simply indifferent – to each their own, they hold. While for the proselytising religions, conversion of others is considered an essential component of advancing “God’s work.” The other traditions are, at best, preparations for conversion into the “One True Religion” and, at worst, downright Satanic. For the evangelicals, conversion is a moral position. It is not seen as an act of aggression on other traditions, but merely the

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benevolent saving of the heathens who would otherwise be condemned to hell. They cannot thus be, doctrinally, indifferent to these others. When combined with institutional mobilisation, this becomes a global war for religious affiliation — the target no less than the eradication of all other religions that are seen as competitors keeping humans in the sway of Satan.

Thus the campaign for conversion is fundamentally unsymmetrical. The native traditions are grossly unprepared to fight this war. Unlike the mission organizations, they have not collected the demographics of their “opponents”, their sources of funds, their social problems, competitive analyses of their creeds, their strengths and weaknesses, the flaws in their marketing literature. They have not prepared their own list of target groups among the “non-believers.” They have not, because unlike the evangelicals, they do not consider all the other traditions of the worlds as their opponents and competitors. There is no doctrine within these traditions that supports the idea that all other people on the planet must be converted to their particular way.

Ironically it is secular ideas of the human right of religious freedom that are used to protect evangelical expansion against native traditions. Makau Mutua, writing about the African traditions, points out that “the (human) rights regime incorrectly assumes a level playing field by requiring that African religions compete in the marketplace of ideas. The rights corpus not only forcibly imposes on African religions the obligation to compete—a task for which as nonproselytizing, noncompetitive creeds they are not historically fashioned—but also protects the evangelizing religions in their march towards universalization ... it seems inconceivable that the human rights regime would have intended to protect the right of certain religions to destroy others.”<sup>13</sup>



Similarly, the *Asian Tribune* puts forth a Buddhist perspective on conversions in Sri Lanka:

“The stubborn refusal of Western religious rights groups to see the conversion issue in its proper Asian context has seriously complicated the matter. Buddhism in Sri Lanka as in Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Laos and Tibet is inextricably linked to the country’s cultural and national heritage ...

Instead, Buddhists allege that the West wants to impose on Sri Lanka the Protestant concept of a gathered congregation of individual believers, a notion that has shaped the development of provisions protecting religious freedom under international law. But the problem is that this law was developed to protect individuals and religious groups from the State persecution *and not to protect one religious community from being proselytized by another*, according to Buddhist lawyers who are actively campaigning for the enactment of anti-conversion legislation.”<sup>14</sup> (emphasis. added)

In other words, secular ideas of human rights to religious freedom protect religious groups from state interference – addressing the problems that Europe encountered, but not the issues faced in the Asian context. Thus these ideas do not account for conflict and repression caused by powerful well-funded global corporate entities seeking to eliminate the religious traditions of local communities.

Even if the native traditions were resourced and aware of how to respond to the evangelical activity, to be forced to respond to it is also a curtailment of their freedom. This is because a response to evangelical activity in kind will invariably turn the traditions into a mirror image of those religions and into a caricature of their own traditions,

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i.e., they would have ended up accepting the position of the proselytising creeds that religion is a competitive endeavor and is a global war. In a war, they would study how to bring the “fight” to the other side. So as the Baptists launched their mission to convert the Nagas, the Nagas would launch missions to convert the Baptists. The fact that they do not is the fundamental difference between the two kinds of religious systems that leads to the asymmetry of motivation. As Swami Dayananda Saraswati wrote in an open letter to the then Pope:

“You cannot ask me to respond to conversion by converting others to

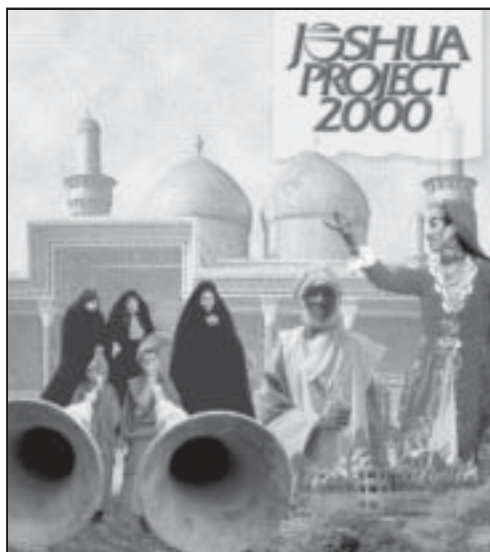
my religion because it is not part of my tradition. ... Thus, conversion is not merely violence against people; it is violence against people who are committed to non-violence.”<sup>15</sup>

While the competitive view of religion is natural to the evangelical, to respond in kind makes native traditions into something that they are not. This is precisely why there is such conflict and ambivalence over the “re-conversion” activities of Hindutva in India. In responding to conversion by re-conversion, Hindutva forms itself into a mirror of the proselytising religions. While ostensibly seeking to uphold the Indian traditions, changes them into a competitive Abrahamic caricature in a way that makes most Indians deeply uncomfortable.

Thus evangelical activity takes away religious freedom from the native traditions on two accounts. To respond competitively would be to alter one’s traditions into competitive religions in the mirror image of the evangelisers—i.e., to treat the conversion game as a religious war for headcount. To passively fail to respond would mean the gradual erosion and destruction of one’s traditions. This catch-22 occurs because the playing field of religious freedom itself has been defined based on the religious history and doctrines of one side.

### **The Asymmetry of Power**

The second asymmetry is the asymmetry of power and resources. When religious freedom gets defined simply as the non-interference of the state in religious activity it serves to privilege those private institutions that view religion as a competitive quest for monopoly and have mobilised enormous resources to this end. It thus favours organised institutional religions over those whose traditions do not have a corporate charter. Evangelical Missions



should best be considered local sales offices of large multi-national corporations. How large? The budget of the International Mission Board 2005 is \$283.1 million (over Rs. 1200 crores). A similar amount in 2004 led to the “planting” of over 21,000 churches across the globe. The one-year revenue of institutionalised Christianity is estimated to be \$260 billion dollars (2001 figures).<sup>16</sup> About a fifth of this, \$47 billion, are allocated to global mission work every year, comparable to the entire annual net tax revenue of the Government of India. Clearly we are dealing with a very well financed and well organised global enterprise. The business of conversion is big business. It demands results in terms of numbers converted. The well-publicised stories of “success amidst difficulty” sustain the fund-raising activities of evangelical groups.

The Joshua Project<sup>17</sup> tracks every “unreached people group” in the world, over six thousand at last count, providing detailed linguistic, demographic and targeting information. This project, started by a splinter group of American Evangelist Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network, is “a large-scale intelligence operation that brought together American

**“A can of  
Coke in the  
hand of  
every  
person on  
earth by the  
year 2000.”**



**-Goal of the Coca-Cola  
Corporation**

strategists, theologians, missionary specialists, demographers, technologists, sociologists, anthropologists and researchers to create the most comprehensive people group profiles in the 10/40 window...”

The 10/40 window, denoting the latitudes on the globe considered the prime target for conversion, has India squarely in its sights. The information is so detailed that “the ethnolinguistic profiling ... cannot even be matched by data with the Government of India.”<sup>18</sup> Its mission is “to identify and highlight the people groups of the world that have the least exposure to the Gospel and the least Christian presence in their midst. The Joshua Project shares this information “to

encourage pioneer church-planting movements among every ethnic people group.”<sup>19</sup> According to the Project overview “Mission agencies use the data to strategically determine where to send new church-planting teams.” *Mission Frontiers* magazine tracks the “progress” in reaching those people. Between 1995 and 2000, 1200 additional people groups were subjected to a “Church Planting” movement in their midst.

Among the targets—the small “Akha” group in Vietnam consisting of a mere 3040 people following their ethnic traditions to the largest groups—the 13 million Sinhalese who follow Buddhism—only 4 per cent of which have yet been converted according to the Joshua database. India contains the largest number of targeted groups. Sample targets – among the Buddhists – the 102,480 Bhotias in Sikkim, and the 47,030 Sherpas, the 162,210 Tibetan Buddhists and the 8,410,800 Marathi Neo Buddhists; the 3,165,200 Bania Jains; among the Muslims – the 9,796,100 Ansaris, the 6,938,600 Sayyids, the 894,690 Faqirs and the 112,420 Ganchis.

The tribal religionists are, of course, the easiest targets, many of them having already been “reached” – a remaining sample include the

**At the beginning of  
this decade,  
researchers  
reported that more  
than 1,900 different  
evangelization  
plans by Christian  
organizations and  
denominations  
focused on the year  
2000.**



**The ‘AD 2000  
and Beyond  
Movement’ was  
founded to help  
coordinate these  
different plans to  
help organizations  
work together to  
avoid duplication  
of efforts to  
assure..**

**...a church for every people and the gospel for every person  
by the year 2000**

Mongpa, all of 850 people, following Tibetan Himalayan customs. The Sikhs are another major target – further divided into 58 groups, from the 11,581,200 Jat Sikhs to the 880 Assamese Sikhs. Among the 1596 Hindu target groups – the 3.4 million Aroras, the 53.5 million Yadavs, the 6.9 million Nairs, the Sonar community of nearly 6.5 million people to the barely 14,000 Kashmiri Hindu Zargars.

To each of these thousands of target groups gets assigned church planting teams, missionaries, resources, funds, media support, Bibles in their language and dubbed versions of the “Jesus” film (with children’s versions), now available in a staggering 877 languages. No other global corporate multinational could come close to a marketing campaign of this breadth.

To imagine that the native traditions are “free” to compete in the well-resourced global onslaught is to ignore both the disparity of resources, and more importantly fundamental differences in the nature of the traditions. The idea of a “free market” of religions thus arises from and supports the competitive world view of evangelical religion.

Since the believers of evangelical religions consider missionary activity as part of their faith, such believers in high places can have a disproportionate impact over those of non-evangelical traditions. The report “George Bush Has a Conversion Agenda for India”<sup>20</sup> describes the US President as “probably the most resourceful and influential Christian Missionary ever.” While Bush Jr.’s evangelical beliefs get a lot of attention, this is certainly not a new phenomenon in the US. Faith has always been a very important issue for American voters. President Bush’s “Faith-based initiative” merely legitimises direct monetary support from the US Government to Christian groups. In 2004 alone, \$2 billion

## Pope Of The Most Holy Bomb



(nearly Rs. 8,600 crore) dollars were paid by the US Government<sup>21</sup>, overwhelmingly to Christian groups, under this program.

The disproportionately Western-influenced global media, working with secular ideas of religious liberty that support evangelism, is muted in its criticism and coverage of the plans and tactics of missionaries. On the other hand, rare instances of violent reaction to missionary activities get disproportionate worldwide coverage and attention. The stories of alleged persecution reinforce the evangelical self-image of Christian martyrdom even when the resources at their disposal are far greater than the groups they target. While there is absolutely no justification for violence in a democratic society, current laws provide little recourse to the target groups to prevent missionary activities in their midst, even when it

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causes conflict and tensions within the communities.

For instance, Talom Rukbo, the father of the Donyipolo Movement in Arunachal Pradesh, remarked:

“The church—Christian missionaries—quickly capitalized on the innocence of our forefathers. They fraudulently convinced our people that we were barbarians and converted some into Christianity. ... They declared that the converted persons must

discard (1) the “animist” practices, (2) our festivals and that our Gods and Goddesses were Saitan (evil spirits—Satan). ...

Slowly this created frequent disturbances and social disharmony. The Christian missionaries were stooping to the lowest, most uncivilized means to tear social fabric of our society apart.”<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately the current human rights regime makes it very difficult for even democratically elected governments to restrict missionary activity.

### Can One Say “No”?

While there are laws to restrict intrusive commercial solicitation and deceptive marketing practices these apparently do not apply to the sales force<sup>23</sup> of the religious multinationals.

Let us say a remote group in Arunachal Pradesh actually becomes aware of this conversion war in which they are a statistic on a plan. Perhaps they have heard of the consequences of this campaign for a neighbouring village group and wish to preserve their traditions without interference. The *panchayat* or the democratically elected council votes to disallow missionary activity in their midst. What would happen?

Precisely the same language of “human rights” would then be used to target this tribe. Because the right to “change” and to “propagate” religion has been made into a “human right” any law that seeks to curb



missionary activity can then be ruled as a violation of human rights. This anomaly occurs precisely because of the fact that the definitions of religious freedom are not culture neutral. They arise from a culture in which religion has been viewed as a transferable “belief system” and a competitive evangelical enterprise. This definition affords little human rights protection *from* evangelical activity to those that do not hold these views of religion.

Just as a village may wish to pass such a law, can a state do it, can a country? The consequences can be readily seen in the debate on a bill for religious freedom that was recently approved by the Council of Ministers in Sri Lanka and is up for debate in the Sri Lankan parliament. While the bill prohibits conversions with the use of coercion or allurements, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has expressed “concern” urging the “Sri Lankan Government to refrain from passing laws that are inconsistent with international standards.”<sup>24</sup> These international standards are precisely the human rights laws that are the subject of this discussion.

Numerous Christian organisations, including the World Evangelical Alliance are putting pressure on the Sri Lankan Government to forestall the bill. Christina Rocca, the US Secretary of State, reportedly expressed “grave concern” over the proposed legislation to Sri Lanka’s ambassador to the United States. “Ms Rocca has explained that the Department of State was receiving numerous representations from Senators and Congressmen about the Government’s move. During a previous meeting, The Sunday Times learns, Ms Rocca had warned that pressure was building up and this could have adverse consequences on US aid and trade concessions to Sri Lanka.”<sup>25</sup>

Once the right to change religion and to propagate is made a fundamental human right without a

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corresponding right to not be asked to change or be subject to proselytising activity the situation becomes one-sided. The state is now obligated to protect the missionary’s activities while no protection is afforded to the non-proselytising community’s tradition so that they are not made targets of highly-organised and well-funded conversion campaigns.

### **The Exclusivity of Belief**

The premise of evangelical activity is the belief that theirs is the only true way and everyone else is, at best, in error if not absolutely demonic. This belief inevitably sets those who believe thus into conflict with everyone else. It is not surprising that the primary principle under attack by evangelicals is the principle of religious pluralism.

“Good News for India” defines itself as “an interdenominational Christian organization that is committed to training, sending out, and supporting national missionaries to preach the Gospel and plant churches among the unreached people groups of the Indian subcontinent.”<sup>26</sup> Good News for India runs the Luther W. New Jr. Theological College in Dehradun with several small satellite training centers in five north Indian states, over 163 churches, and several primary schools. The college was dedicated by the President of Word [World?] Vision, a global NGO associated with Christian evangelical

activity. The aim of the college – to churn out “national missionaries” that are more cost-effective than Westerners. Good News for India finds their methods of training “very effective in producing laborers for the harvest in India.” They offer accredited Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in missionary activity leading to paid careers as missionaries and boast of having “planted” 350 churches under the name “Christian Evangelistic Assemblies.”

Clearly, this group of evangelicals knows India well. That is why they list that their major challenge in India is the pluralistic Indian thinking.

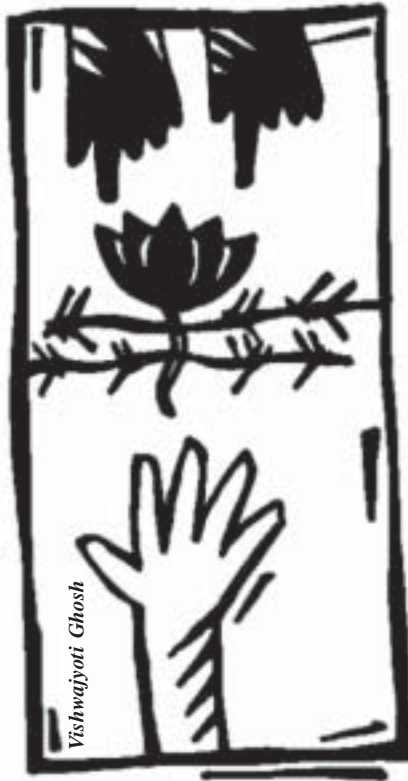
“Anyone who is familiar with India knows that India has always been a challenge to the Gospel. Hinduism that teaches, “just as all rivers lead to the ocean, all religions lead to God”, dominates the thinking of the masses. ... Many Hindus revere Jesus as another god. Yet their eyes are blinded to the uniqueness of Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

The goal then of evangelical conversion is to lift the “blindness” of pluralism to convert into an exclusive belief system. Indeed without that no conversion can take place. If it was simply the question of learning from another way, or accepting another way as true, one does not actually need to be “converted” to do that. *All conversion is a conversion into exclusivism.* For all those concerned with retaining India’s pluralistic ethos evangelical activity should thus be of particular concern. It is not surprising then, that after decades of successful conversion activity in Nagaland, the separatist groups that routinely use terrorist methods against their opponents have the exclusive slogan of “Nagaland for Christ.” This switch happens when exclusivism reaches a dominant position in a region. The long-term implications of exclusivist conversion should concern all those who wish India to remain a pluralistic and diverse nation.

The idea of “change” of religion from [Article 18 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration again comes from a culture in which multiple religious participation does not make sense. In testimony before the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Prof. Sharma of McGill stated “(1) That the concept of religious freedom articulated in article 18 presupposes a certain concept of religion itself, a concept associated with Western religion and culture; (2) That a different concept of religion ... leads to a different concept of religious freedom; and (3) That unless human rights discourse is able to harmonize these two concepts of religious freedom ... the clash of the two concepts might ultimately result in the abridgement of religious freedom in actual practice...”<sup>28</sup>

According to the 1985 census in Japan, for instance, 95 per cent of the population of Japan declared itself as followers of Shinto and 76 per cent of the same population also declared itself as Buddhist. Clearly, a significant fraction considered themselves multiple religious participants. Even in India, early British census takers were flummoxed by people happy to subscribe to multiple religions till they were coerced by the colonial census to choose one or the other. This pluralism, deeply ingrained in the Indian people, finds expression as far back as the Rig Veda and the Ashoka pillars. Sharma states “If the Indian census-takers did not insist that one can only belong to one religion - significantly a British and therefore Western legacy - I would not be at all surprised if the Indian religious statistical reality began to resemble the Japanese.”

However, Article 18 of the charter of human rights presupposes that one can only belong to one religion at a time. As Sharma continues, “If one believes that one can only belong to one religion at a time, then it stands



to reason that religious freedom would essentially consist of one’s freedom to change such affiliation by the voluntary exercise of choice.”

However, in the context of multiple religious participation a different idea of religious freedom would emerge – one that the Indian constitution and the Indian census do not, ironically, support – the freedom to profess multiple religions without being asked to choose one or to change into another.

Sharma concludes, “(In the Eastern context) ... freedom of religion means that the person is left free to explore his or her religious life without being challenged to change his or her religion. Such exploration need not be confined to any one religion, and may freely embrace the entire religious and philosophical heritage of humanity.”

This explains the difference between evangelical activity and, for instance, the spread of Indian traditions. Indian traditions can best be regarded as practical learning traditions. They rarely required

disavowal of existing belief or tradition. Learning traditions like the teachings of the Buddha could thus be accretive – as they were in China and Japan. To accept the message of the Buddha did not mean to consign one’s ancestors to hell or to reject existing community practices. This is quite similar to the way Indian Swamis brought the practice of Yoga to Americans in contemporary times, without any requirements of “conversion.” One could learn and do the practices of *yoga asanas* and meditation as a Christian, Muslim or Jew without any requirement to disavow one’s religion.

### **Towards a Balanced View**

There is a cultural conflict between two very different ideas of religion and of religious freedom. For one the “right to change” is central. To the other the right to retain or continue without interference from the state *or* from powerful global institutions is paramount. Current rights language favours the former and insufficiently protects the latter. How do we move towards a more balanced view?

We do not suggest that the “right to change” should itself be taken away. For instance, some schools of Islamic jurisprudence hold that apostasy by a Muslim renouncing Islam is punishable by death. This certainly does not support the spirit of individual freedom or enquiry. Similarly, we do not hold that tradition is itself immune from criticism or change. There is plenty of scope for individuals within or outside a tradition to criticise, change and evolve particular practices.

Yet, exploration, individual critique or specific reform is different from a systematic institutional effort aimed at converting all others and annihilating their traditions resulting in the destruction of entire cultural ecosystems. As Mutua writes, “Imperial religions have necessarily violated individual conscience and the communal expressions of Africans and their communities by subverting



African religions. In doing so they have robbed Africans of essential elements of their humanity ... The result ... is a culturally disconnected people neither African nor European or Arab.”<sup>29</sup>

What would a charter of religious freedom look like if it were being defined by the “unreached” people, with knowledge of consequences others have obtained at the hands of the proselytizing creeds, rather than by the evangelical cultures? Perhaps it would read something like this:

“All peoples have the right to pass on their traditions to their children without interference, without being subjected to organised institutional evangelical activity by others. All peoples find their traditions of value – if not they can always abandon them or make changes. However, no one shall form an association with the express purpose of getting others to convert people away from their religion or to teach others to do so. All peoples have the right to the preservation of their culture and traditions and the right to be free of religious evangelism.

Every human being has the right to be free from being subject to the preaching of exclusive religious doctrines. Every person is free to participate in and learn from none, one or more ways to happiness and fulfillment without being asked to specify a religious identity or to convert from one to another.

No religious, political, social, religious or educational institution or organisation will be permitted to have as its aims the systematic conversion of other people. The marketing claims of institutional religions aiming at conversion will be subjected to the same legal test as those of other corporate entities. Every individual is free to explore the religions and practices of the world without being subjected to systematic marketing and conversion campaigns.”

To test the asymmetry of the current definition one can predict that

this new definition of religious freedom would be most objected to by specific groups – prominent among these would be evangelical Christians and their power base. Most groups that follow ethnic traditions throughout the globe, other than those that act as proxies for evangelical interests, or those that are attached to the presumed neutrality of “secular” definitions of religious freedom, would welcome the change. If anything, that is the clearest indicator of how the *current* definition of religious freedom is seriously asymmetrical in its assumptions.

Nothing in this formulation should be construed as restricting the freedom of any community to practice their faith privately and in congregations of fellow believers. At the same time such freedom should not extend to constraining the freedom of others to practice without interference.

Augmenting the human right to practice as well as change one’s religion with the rights of communities to be free of organised campaigns that aim to destroy the practice of their traditions by conversion into exclusive religious systems would provide a necessary balance for maintaining religious harmony and protecting cultural and religious diversity.

#### Footnotes

1. Makau Mutua in *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief, A Deskbook*. Published by the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2004. Chapter 28.
2. Balgangadhara, S N. *The Heathen in His Blindness*. Manohar Books.
3. Quoted from *The Heathen in His Blindness*.
4. *An Indian speech in answer to a sermon, preached by a Swedish missionary at Conestogo in Pennsylvania*. Early American imprints. Second series; no. 6535. American Antiquarian Society, 1966
5. American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994. Hearing, Serial No. 103-92. Statement of Regis Pecob, Member Pueblo de Cochiti Tribal Council.

6. Young India: January 19, 1928
7. <http://www.imb.org/missionspartner/mobooklet/mobintro.asp>
8. <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>
9. <http://www.joshuaproject.net>
10. See, for instance, <http://www.ad2000.org> and <http://www.joshuaproject.net/index.php>
11. *Tehelka*, “Preparing for the harvest...”, February 7, 2004.
12. This was in the prayer section of the International Missionary Board website on June 3, 2005, <http://imb.org/compassionnet/> but was later removed after publicity on a site that tracks Christian missionary activity on [http://www.christianaggression.com/item\\_display.php?type=NEWS&id=1117790952](http://www.christianaggression.com/item_display.php?type=NEWS&id=1117790952). It is still available at the Southern Baptist Convention prayer site <http://www.sbcprayer.net>
13. Makau Mutua, Chapter 28
14. Asian Tribune. May 3, 2005. *Controversy over Freedom of Religion Bill: Buddhists to meet UN envoy today*. [http://www.asiantribune.com/show\\_news.php?id=14309](http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=14309)
15. <http://conversionagenda.blogspot.com/1999/10/is-conversion-is-violence-on-hindus.html>
16. Source: *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press. 2001.
17. <http://www.joshuaproject.net>
18. *Tehelka*, “Preparing for the harvest...”, February 7, 2004.
19. <http://www.joshuaproject.net/overview.php>
20. *Tehelka*, February 7, 2004
21. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20050301-044719-3828r.htm>
22. Talom Rukbo the Father of the Donyipolo Movement in Arunachal Pradesh from a talk he gave called “The Truth Every Bharatiya Should Know”: (quoted in <http://www.vnn.org/world/WD0302/WD21-7837.html>)
23. Many of the missionaries are paid “stipends.” Colleges in India graduate native missionaries by the thousands who are then given a paid job with conversion quotas. So yes, this is a sales force.
24. [http://www.uscirf.gov/mediaroom/press/2005/july/07132005\\_srilanka.html](http://www.uscirf.gov/mediaroom/press/2005/july/07132005_srilanka.html)
25. Sunday Times (Sri Lanka), July 31, 2005. *US Warns Lanka on Religious Bill*.
26. <http://www.goodnewsforindia.org/about.htm>
27. <http://www.goodnewsforindia.org/about.htm>
28. [http://www.uscirf.gov/events/hearings/2000/september/pane11/SubPanelA/09182000\\_Sharma\\_test.html](http://www.uscirf.gov/events/hearings/2000/september/pane11/SubPanelA/09182000_Sharma_test.html)
29. Makau Mutua, Chapter 28

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