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**Discordant Notes:  
Proselytism in an Age of Pluralism**

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The year 2010 marks the centenary of the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh. The conference symbolized a tremendous optimism for the evangelization of the world among Western churches and mission societies; the leaders of the conference were so confident in the success of Christian missionary endeavors that they came up with the slogan,

“Evangelization of the world in our generation.” It was the same fervor that led some to believe that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would be a “Christian Century.” This seminal conference gave birth to the formation of the modern ecumenical movement among Protestant Christians, eventually leading to the formation of the World Council of Churches. It must be remembered that the conference in 1910 was held during the heyday of modern Protestant missions implicitly or explicitly supported by the colonial powers that had ruled large parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Edinburgh conference was held at a time when a “missiology of conquest,” based on “Modernist” assumptions was a dominant element. The “unholy” alliance between colonization and Christian mission provided the background for the evangelization of the non-Christian world.<sup>1</sup>

A century later it seems Western societies no longer exhibit the same degree of enthusiasm or missionary fervor that once dominated Christian thinking. It has become apparent that the old missiology of conquest has lost its credibility with a changing or changed perception of mission and evangelization of the world today. This is in part attributable to a tremendous resurgence of world religions and non-Western cultures on formerly colonized continents. Major religions of the world have shown significant vitality and have expanded their geographical reach. Asian religions are no longer confined to Asia and their presence in Western societies is becoming more pronounced. Interestingly, in recent decades, after the collapse of the colonial enterprise, Christianity too has registered significant demographic growth in the formerly

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1991). Stephen B. Beavens and Roger P. Schroeder, ed. *Constants in Context, A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004).

colonized worlds of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The newly coined term “World Christianity” has garnered considerable attention in Christian churches recently.<sup>2</sup>

It is premature to determine the prospects for the future growth of Christianity in predominantly non-Christian societies, notwithstanding the demographic projections put forward by centers for the study of World Christianity.<sup>3</sup> This highly optimistic projection of the growth of Christianity in many parts of the world comes at a time when most Western Christian denominations are experiencing a steady erosion of membership and decline in church attendance.<sup>4</sup> The process of de-Christianization seems to be more accelerated in European societies than in North America. There are, of course, many sociological factors that have contributed to this erosion of Christianity in traditionally Christian societies, the most important factor being the emergence of a pluralistic consciousness. In the North American context today there is a greater awareness of the reality of religious pluralism and an increasing trend toward disaffiliation or non-affiliation with organized religion.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, religions of the world have gone global and have begun to extend their reach and influence beyond their home base, or countries and cultures of origin.

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<sup>2</sup> David Jenkins, *The Next Christendom, The Coming of Global Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See latest statistics in *International Bulletin for Missionary Research*, 34:1 (January 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Eileen W. Lindner, ed. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2010* (New York: NCCUSA, 2010); Lovett H. Weems Jr. “No Shows: The Decline in Worship Attendance,” *The Christian Century*, September 22, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *The US Religious Landscape Survey*, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

The “globalization” of religions in our time on the one hand has brought about greater recognition of religious diversity in most societies, on the other it has contributed to even greater tensions and conflicts. Globalization of Religions in effect has challenged every religious community to come to terms with the reality of religious pluralism. This reality is more acutely felt in Western societies. In North America, in a recent book titled, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, the authors disclose that while most American citizens acknowledge or welcome religious diversity in their midst, there is a profound dislike towards those who are outside of “America’s Judeo-Christian framework.”<sup>6</sup> This dislike is directed not only toward Muslims but also toward Buddhists. The recent controversy surrounding the attempted Qur’an burning in Florida is an extreme example of emerging hostility toward non-Christian faiths existing alongside of a growing acceptance of religious diversity in the United States.

A similar form of hostility toward certain religious faiths has reared its ugly head in many parts of the world. Much of this hostility is directed against Christians and Muslims because of perceived fears of Christian-inspired world dominance by the “American empire” and Muslim fundamentalist -inspired terrorism directed against destabilizing societies around the world. Notwithstanding the political dimensions of this conflict, the underlying source of interreligious tensions lies in the fact that both Christianity and Islam, as convert-seeking religions, have been seen as predatory and unwilling to come to terms with religious plurality and diversity in the world. As the world’s two largest religious communities, they have not only been at loggerheads

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<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon Schuster, 2010).

with each other, but also together they have been perceived by other religious communities as a threat to religious identity and cultural survival. As a consequence, both Christianity and Islam have come under severe scrutiny: they must justify their proselytizing activities beyond merely citing their internal scriptural mandates, in the presence of other faiths and in response to other religious claims and commitments. Christians in particular have now been challenged to reexamine the legitimacy of *proselytism* or *evangelization* in the face of the globalization of religions. These issues have emerged as highly contested and explosive in many cultural contexts. How one reconciles the Christian desire for proselytism with the reality of religious pluralism has therefore become a crucial issue.

### **"Can we all just get along?"**

One may recall this memorable remark made by Rodney King, a victim of police brutality following the Los Angeles urban unrest of April 1992 that resulted in the death of 53 people and 1 billion dollars in damage. The phrase, "Can we all just get along?" has forever become synonymous with the riot.<sup>7</sup>

One could as well pose that question in our context of religious pluralism. Why do religious people target other people as objects of proselytization? Why must one interfere with the faith and beliefs of other people? Why don't we mind our own business and let others mind theirs? Can we not simply get along with one another without intruding into each other's religious and spiritual lives?

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<sup>7</sup> "The L.A. Riots: 15 Years After Rodney King," [http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/la\\_riot/article/0,28804,1614117\\_1614084,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/la_riot/article/0,28804,1614117_1614084,00.html)

Exclusivist claims for the superiority of one's beliefs are not merely internal claims heard within the confines of one's religious community but are also heard by those outside of it. When those claims are translated into overt or covert forms of persuasion or proselytism they become problematic in the context of religious and social pluralism. The etiquette of pluralism, with its demands for politeness, toleration, civility and acceptance of the other, sees proselytism as an assault on someone else's identity and therefore socially disruptive. Whatever the internal scriptural, doctrinal or inner warrant there may be within a religious community, outwardly, religious communities tend to be a bit more circumspect, if not embarrassed about, their proselytizing activities. The idea of proselytism often brings about some theological discomfort among Christians, and therefore there is a tendency to soften or hide what is being done under benign or non-threatening rubrics such as "sharing the faith," "reaching out in love," "witnessing" and the like. However carefully Christians may nuance the meaning of *mission*, *evangelism*, *witness* or *evangelization* in their theological self-understanding, these categories are often conflated with *proselytism* in public discourse. In the mind of the public, proselytism seems to have an unethical or improper ring to it. In religiously plural and culturally diverse contexts the ethics of proselytism invariably comes into collision with the etiquette of pluralism.

Attitudes toward proselytism are shaped by historical, theological, social, cultural and political considerations, and responses to it vary from context to context. Convert-seeking religions, especially Christianity and Islam the two dominant colonizing religions, have been subject to severe critique for their proselytizing activities by those who are threatened by such activities and by those who hold deep pluralistic convictions. Proselytism is related to issues of

religious freedom and religious conversion. Change of *religious allegiance or conversion from one faith to another, whether voluntary or involuntary, whether involving a single individual or an entire community, can be unsettling in society.* In the 1970's when new religious movements burst into secularized Western societies there was a great deal of hue and cry, and accusations of "brainwashing" were leveled against such proselytizing new movements. In other contexts – especially in Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and Africa – conflicts have risen between indigenous religions and "foreign religions" promoting proselytizing programs. The fear that religious conversions may alter the demographic equation within a society and may destabilize established religious and communal identities has caused violent reactions in some contexts.

In recent years reaction against and controversy over proselytism, conversion, dissemination of religious views and missionary activities have become all too common:

- In the aftermath of the tragic tsunami in 2005, it was widely reported that a US-based Evangelical group was accused of proselytism when it transported 300 children from Banda Aceh to Jakarta, Indonesia, to be placed in a Protestant orphanage. This incident created uproar among Indonesian Muslims that Christian humanitarian efforts were being used to proselytize Muslims in hard to reach areas. Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, the *Nadhlatul Ulama* (NU), called on the government to investigate the issue on the grounds that such initiatives could undermine the climate of religious harmony in the country.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?art=2370&l=en>

- In India several Indian states have promulgated “Freedom of Religion” laws to restrict religious conversions by “allurement or fraudulent means” as disruptive to communal harmony. Hindu nationalists have been strident in reclaiming the cultural rights of Hindus to remain and practice their inherited faith without interference from the proselytizing activities of another religion. Critics of the bill fear that it could be misused to torture and imprison Christian missionaries on fabricated charges.<sup>9</sup> Proselytism is a politically charged issue in such post-colonial contexts, where the religion of the former colonizers is still feared.
- The Russian Orthodox Patriarchate has criticized Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries alike for invading the Orthodox “canonical territory.” The critique is based on an understanding that certain churches have an ecclesiastical authority within a geographical domain of the people or nation, inside of which evangelization has been and continues to be the responsibility of the national church. The inseparable identity of church, culture and land in some Eastern Orthodox Churches makes proselytism by others an illegitimate activity. In 1997, at the urging of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Duma passed the law of “Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” proscribing religious propaganda for religious organizations that have been in existence in Russia for less than fifty years.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, the Pope and the Roman Catholic

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<sup>9</sup> <http://christianpersecutionindia.blogspot.com/2008/03/freedom-of-religion-bill-passed-in.html>. For a scholarly discussion of the issues in the Indian context, see Sebastian C. H. Kim, *In Search of Identity, Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> David Kerr, “Christian Understanding of Proselytism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23 (1999): 10.



Church have expressed resentment toward Evangelical incursions into predominantly Catholic territories in Latin America.<sup>11</sup>

- Most recently, the baptism of Magdi Allam, an Egyptian-born Italian journalist, into Catholicism by Pope Benedict XVI during the Easter vigil in 2008, infuriated many Muslims around the world. Supporters interpreted the Pope's action as the defense of religious freedom, evangelization and co-existence of religions. "We no longer stand alongside or in opposition to one another," Benedict XVI said in a homily reflecting on the meaning of the baptism; "Thus faith is a force for peace and reconciliation in the world: distances between people are overcome; in the Lord we have become close."<sup>12</sup> This message, coming as it did on the heels of the Pope's controversial remark about the religion of Prophet Mohammed as spreading faith by violence, created considerable controversy.<sup>13</sup>

These few examples will suffice to illustrate a renewed attention to the problem of proselytism in a religiously plural world.

### **Meaning and Limits to Proselytism**

*Proselytism* often evokes a strong reaction; the term no longer carries the positive meaning it did in its origins in the Jewish and Christian tradition. In its original Biblical meaning

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<sup>11</sup> See Papal Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*. Paul E. Sigmund, ed., *Religious Freedom and Evangelization of Latin America: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> As reported by the Associate Press: [http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8VIR44G0&show\\_article=1](http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8VIR44G0&show_article=1)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/ september/ documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/ september/ documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html)

*proselytism* referred to Gentile converts to Judaism, or more precisely, a Gentile who had begun to observe Jewish law. Jesus' criticism of the treatment of Jewish proselytes (Mat. 23:15) indicates that their incorporation into Israel was a matter of controversy even in Jesus' time. Nonetheless, in the New Testament Jewish proselytes were among the first Christians (Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). However, conversion in the New Testament did not imply a change in community so much as a call to new obedience to God in Jesus Christ. Conversion did not necessarily mean a breach in relationships whereby a person left one community to become a member of another. Those who are joined to Christ are not to cut themselves off from their own communities or families. On the contrary, they are to consider their baptism a beginning of a new mission of solidarity with Christ and others.<sup>14</sup> In that sense the post-biblical histories of both Judaism and Christianity suggest a continued acceptance of proselytism as a positive form of religious propagation.

*Proselytism* did not acquire a negative connotation until the time of the European Enlightenment, when the term came to be identified with intolerance. Against the backdrop of an era of religious strife in post-Reformation Europe, issues of personal liberty and tolerance gained prominence, and aggressive evangelism or religious pressure began to be viewed as disruptive of peace.<sup>15</sup> Enlightenment philosophers tended to equate proselytism with religious fanaticism. This negative meaning of proselytism has been carried over to the English language as a pejorative connotation, suggesting a coercive or manipulative activity that seeks to change the religious

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<sup>14</sup> Eugene P. Heideman, "Proselytism, Mission, and the Bible," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (1996): 10-12.

<sup>15</sup> David Kerr, "Christian Understanding of Proselytism," p. 8.

allegiance of another. It is sometimes used in a disparaging sense as referring to unworthy or fraudulent means employed to win over or persuade the *proselytizee* to the faith of the *proselytizer*. In the minds of many proselytizing is not ordinarily seen as a good thing, especially if it involves “evangelistic malpractice” such as intimidation, coercion, economic enticement, and similar practices.<sup>16</sup> But the difficulty here is that “intimidation, coercion, manipulation and enticement” are categories seldom defined or distinguished and are elusive to prove without psychologizing their meaning. *Proselytism* implies persuasion, but at what point instances of authentic persuasion become real or perceived intimidation or subtle coercion cannot be determined in the abstract.<sup>17</sup> There is a genuine temptation to view whatever claims one disapproves of, rejects or feels uncomfortable with, as proselytism.

The category of *proselytism* therefore implies a moral judgment. Those who disapprove of proselytizing activities tend to make a moral judgment about the intent and integrity of the proselytizer. Advocates of proselytism, too, are engaged in moral judgment about the religion of the *proselytizee* as wrong, deficient or unsatisfactory while seeing the rightness, fullness and propriety of the beliefs and values of the *proselytizer*.<sup>18</sup> There is an implied moral, theological or religious superiority of the proselytizer and conversely, the inferiority of the proselytizee.

What complicates a clear understanding of *proselytism* is as much a matter of perspective as it is of improper method. Changes in religious affiliation or membership can happen through

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<sup>16</sup> Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Mission and the Issue of Proselytism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (1996): 1.

<sup>17</sup> Paul J. Griffiths and Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Proselytizing for Tolerance,” *First Things* 127 (Nov. 2002): 30-36.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 31.

spontaneous conversion or through external inducements. What constitutes sacred duty or obedience to the evangelistic mandate for one group appears as improper proselytizing to another. There is no rigorous legal distinction between *proselytism* and *evangelism*, therefore Christian missionaries accuse other denominations or evangelical groups of engaging in the former while the latter is what they themselves claim. Within Christian denominations proselytism often implies “sheep stealing,” finding converts to one’s confession among members of – “belonging to” – another Christian confession. The history of Christian missions past and present is replete with examples of such activities and accusations. The growth of certain “Mega Churches” in recent times is attributed to their drawing members away from other established churches through effective marketing, the use of glitzy mass media and a strong appeal to switch denominational affiliation.

### **Proselytism, Religious Freedom and Human Rights**

*Proselytism*, whether proper or improper, legitimate or illegitimate, does raise issues of religious freedom. A free exercise of one’s religion can be an intrusion into the privacy or group identity of another. Proselytism thus raises serious questions about issues of human rights pertaining to religious freedom, understood both as *freedom of religion* and *freedom from religion*. The exercise of the freedom *of* religion includes the right to profess, practice and propagate, and the freedom *from* religion implies the right *not* to be coerced or persuaded into accepting religious beliefs and behavior. The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

affirms “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” adding that “this right includes the freedom to change [one’s religion or belief].”<sup>19</sup>

Those who argue for legal restrictions on missionary activity, however, cite the 1966 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, which reaffirms the right of religious freedom by stating, “This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of [one’s] choice.” At the same time, the covenant specifically prohibits coercion: “No one shall be subject to coercion which should impair his [sic] freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”<sup>20</sup> In subsequent international discussions on religion and human rights (especially in the 1981 *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*) there is no reference to the right to change or adopt a religion. It is simply stated that one has the right “to have a religion or whatever belief of one’s choice,” reiterating that this choice must not be impaired by any form of coercion.<sup>21</sup> In international law there seems to be a “shift from an emphasis on the freedom to change a religion, to an emphasis on the freedom to retain a religion.”<sup>22</sup>

This brief discussion with reference to international law suggests an inherent tension that freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief necessarily entails the freedom to choose a religion or belief. The right to replace one’s current religion or belief with another, or to adopt atheistic

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<sup>19</sup> Article 18. See, Johan van der Vyver, “Religious Freedom and Proselytism: Ethical, Political and Legal Aspects,” *Ecumenical Review*, 50:4, 419-429.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Dickerson, “The United Nations and the Freedom of Religion.” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 1995, cited by David Kerr, “Christian Understanding of Proselytism,” p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent analysis of religion and human rights issues, see Nathan Lerner, *Religion, Beliefs and International Human Rights* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> David Kerr, “Christian Understanding of Proselytism,” p, 12.

views, entails also the right to retain one's religion or belief. Thus the problem of proselytism is invariably a *clash between rights*. In religiously pluralistic societies it is not easy to find balance or determine which right should prevail in concrete situations.<sup>23</sup>

*Proselytism* becomes an even more difficult issue when one recognizes that religious communities have different understandings of conversion *into* and *out of* faith. The right to abandon and adopt another religion or the right to remain without a religion is not readily accepted in some religious communities. Apostasy and heresy are punishable offences in some religious communities, as in Islam, while conversion into the community is welcomed. Such beliefs and practices, it must be remembered, were once part of history of the church in Medieval Europe; heresy and theological dissent were repressed or received harshest sanctions, including torture and burning at the stake.

While *conversion* is central to Christian faith (also to Islam and Judaism), not all religious faiths have a similar understanding. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions conversion is inconceivable in the sense of an abrupt or radical change in beliefs, but is rather an evolutionary progression of beliefs that lead to self-realization. The Hindu objection to proselytism is summarized by a well-known Indian philosopher:

Hinduism is wholly free from the strange obsession of some faiths that the acceptance of a particular religious metaphysic is necessary for salvation, and non-acceptance thereof is a heinous sin meriting eternal punishment in hell. Here and there outbursts of sectarian fanaticism are found [in Hinduism]...but the main note of Hinduism is one of respect and good will for other creeds.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For an excellent analysis of religion and human rights issues, see Nathan Lerner, *Religion, Beliefs and International Human Rights* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 28.

In a similar vein Mahatma Gandhi opposed the Christian view of conversion and said, “I am against conversion, whether it is known as *shuddhi* by Hindus, *tabligh* by Mussalmans or proselytizing by Christians.”<sup>25</sup> The evangelistic outreach by Indian Christians therefore has often come under deep suspicion by the dominant Hindu majority in India because the Christian faith is identified with the religion of the colonizer. Christian propagation of the gospel and conversion of Hindus are seen as unwarranted judgment and denigration of ancient Indian beliefs and values. Hindu resentment, sporadic violent reaction against Christian evangelistic activities, and laws that prohibit or restrict conversions to Christianity (or Islam) passed by certain Indian States in recent years are based on the assumption that religious faith is something inherited from one’s ancestors, which cannot be rejected in favor of another.

In the Hindu world-view, and from the perspective of some Asian religions and philosophies, religion represents a tradition (Sanskrit, *sampradaya*) and therefore cannot be false. A religious tradition represents the collective experience of a people, therefore the idea of a single religion or an exclusive allegiance to one particular faith for humankind appears illogical. From this perspective religious belief is not a matter of individual choice or a personal affair but rather an assent to communally sanctioned values and commitments. Proselytism, therefore, is vehemently opposed in the interest of protecting communal or cultural identity. *Conversion* invariably implies a rejection of ancestral heritage and turning against it, so has acquired a negative or pejorative connotation Hindus often reject arguments that support proselytism on the basis of international human rights law because of their understanding that those laws operate on

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<sup>25</sup> M. K. Gandhi, cited in M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 2d ed. (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1976), 209.

Western individualistic assumptions. Despite such rejections, the modern offshoots of Hindu traditions have indeed engaged in overt proselytism, as is demonstrated in the Hare Krishna movement. This suggests that religious traditions, notwithstanding their historical claims, can and do engage in proselytism in situations where they find themselves in the minority or for reasons of self-preservation.

### **Ecumenical Perspectives**

In Christian ecumenical discussions *proselytism* has often surfaced as a subject of discussion. Soon after its formation, as early as 1954, the World Council of Churches (WCC) responded to intra-Christian proselytism and produced a study on *Christian Witness, Proselytism, and Religious Liberty*.<sup>26</sup> This was one of the first documents to draw the distinction between authentic Christian witness and proselytism. The early WCC discussions were primarily intra-Christian focused on issues of proselytism among Protestants and Roman Catholics. In subsequent discussions of proselytism both interreligious and intra-Christian dimensions were included.

The intra-Christian problem of proselytism (“sheep stealing”) was addressed in ecumenical conversation between Protestant churches associated with the WCC and Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions. In later discussion the issue was with the evangelical “invasion” of traditionally Catholic or Orthodox territories. In a study document entitled, *Towards Responsible Relations in Mission*, a WCC working group employed the term “invasion” to describe the “pain that unilateral and insensitive mission activity has caused” by sects and new

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<sup>26</sup> World Council of Churches, *Ecumenical Review*, 9 (Oct. 1956): 48-56.



religious movements. The document affirmed that the “commitment to evangelism is inseparable from the commitment to the unity of the Christian body.”<sup>27</sup> At the Fifth World conference on the Faith and Order of the WCC in 1993 in Santiago de Compostela, the issue of proselytism, including coercive and manipulative methods in the act of evangelism, was seen as a distortion of the “real though distorted *koinonia* that Christians already share.”<sup>28</sup>

As regards interreligious proselytism, the WCC discussions have repeatedly affirmed that the Church has a mission and it cannot be otherwise, while remaining critical of coercive proselytism. The most vexing issue affecting ecumenical discussion, creating a divide between evangelicals and other Protestant communions, pertains to Christian proselytism among Jews. With the memory of the Holocaust still fresh in the minds of Christians there has been considerable hesitancy among some Protestants to engage in proselytizing Jews. There have been calls to proscribe such activity. However, those of evangelical orientation have been more insistent on obedience to the Great Commission by evangelization of “all” people. The missionary character of the church has never been questioned in Protestant ecumenical discussions, in spite of the emerging emphasis on interreligious dialogue in churches. There is a vigorous debate among many Christians about the place of proselytism/evangelism in relation to interreligious dialogue.

The Roman Catholic views, beginning with the Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* (1965) and the various Papal encyclicals (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975 and *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990),

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<sup>27</sup> For a detailed discussion on the subject, see Cecil M Robeck Jr., “Mission and The Issue of Proselytism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1996): 2-8.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas F Best and Günther Gassmann, eds, *On The Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper no 166 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 256.

have never wavered in their affirmation of the “permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate.”<sup>29</sup> This missionary mandate is directed toward “non-Christians” (without definition). The Papal Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, is critical of “proselytism by sects,” while at the same time affirming the right to religious freedom and freedom of conscience. It defends the Church’s right to convert people and claims that interreligious dialogue is “part of the Church’s evangelizing mission.” Interestingly, the Encyclical acknowledges that “followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from ordinary means, which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and Baptism that God wills for all people.”<sup>30</sup> The document does not address the implicit theological ambiguity of such statements.

It is evident from the preceding sketchy description of Protestant and Roman Catholic views on proselytism that there is clear consensus; any activity deemed coercive, unethical and manipulative or that violates the religious freedom of people is unacceptable. At the same time, Protestant and Roman Catholic (not to mention Evangelical) Christian views have consistently maintained the right to mission, evangelism and conversion as an inalienable right, central to the identity and claims of the Christian faith. In sum, ecumenical perspectives lift up the same tensions as found in international law regarding two competing freedoms, the freedom to practice one’s faith and the freedom to change one’s religion, and seek to maintain two competing theological commitments, that is, the right to witness/evangelize/mission and the right to practice and remain in one’s religion.

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed survey of Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox and Protestant Conciliar views on proselytism, see Joel Nichols, “Mission, Evangelism and Proselytism in Christianity: Mainline Conceptions as Documented in Church Documents,” *Emory International Law Review*, 12: 563-656.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

## Pluralistic Assumptions

As noted earlier, the emergence of a pluralistic consciousness among Western Christians has made many uneasy with proselytism because of its hegemonic assumptions. Proselytism, it has been argued, seeks homogeneity and resists the continued presence of the other. It wants to create “one world” based on the exclusive claim of ‘*one prophet, one text and one church,*’ as the Hindu critic Arun Shourie summarizes.<sup>31</sup> Pluralism celebrates diversity, individual autonomy and freedom, including the freedom to decide and choose one’s beliefs without external persuasion and the promptings of a proselytizer. Pluralism values the religious privacy of the individual and prefers not to disrupt or disrespect established religious traditions and values or violate religious boundaries and exploit insecurities of people. By its very nature pluralism is bewildering, dizzying or unsettling to those who are religiously insecure or unsure, whose anxieties are provoked and challenged by the proselytizer.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, pluralism in open societies invariably invites interreligious or intercultural encounter, engagement or jostling, therefore, in pluralistic societies it seems religious privacy is structurally impossible. Pluralism invariably evokes comparison between divergent beliefs and claims, and implicitly questions all absolute claims to belief and authority. In secular societies we are constantly subjected to all forms of persuasion, whether political or commercial, in everyday life. Pluralism, willy-nilly, undermines or questions our sense of

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<sup>31</sup> Cited in Sebastian Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> For an insightful analysis of pluralistic assumptions, see Martin E. Marty, “Introduction: Proselytizers and Proselytizees on the Sharp Arête of Modernity,” in *Sharing the Book, Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism*, eds. John Witte Jr. and Richard C. Martin (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 1-14.

religious autonomy and invites us to either associate or disassociate with competing worldviews, religious or otherwise. It radically challenges claims of religious exclusivism and demands consideration of alternative beliefs and values. Pluralism can indeed be bewildering in that it can either push one toward religious relativism or absolutism. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that pluralism paradoxically creates fundamentalism.

In a pluralistic age, which celebrates freedom and autonomy, pluralism itself can however, become an agent of proselytism, that is, it becomes a belief system or an ideology. Recognition of pluralism can be liberating to those caught in the tyranny of a religion or the captivity of a religious culture, but pluralism can also become a static or stagnant reality if it forecloses the possibility of conversion or change in religious beliefs. The claims of pluralism may very well serve as an antidote to hegemonic assumptions of proselytizing religions, but pluralism can itself become a hegemonic ideology, thus relegating religious beliefs and claims to remain in their respective ghettos or pushing them into cultural isolation or insulation. Absolute pluralism without the possibility of religious conversion to another faith, belief or ideology may well make our world rather stale and comatose.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding analysis has explored the discord between proselytism and pluralism without resolving it. In an era of globalization of religions the proselytizing impulse is no longer restricted to the convert seeking religions, instead all religious faiths have now exhibited a missionary impulse in response to the reality of pluralism. Our world of religious pluralism offers unprecedented choices in beliefs and values, so that proselytism becomes a necessary

corollary of pluralism. Those with insecure identities may find proselytism a threat to religious or cultural self-preservation, but the etiquette of pluralism demands sensitivity to issues of religious identity and highlights the necessity of interreligious engagement as we address unethical or coercive aspects present in the proselytizing activities of religious faiths.

It is the very nature of pluralism to demand public accountability of faiths in the presence of the “other” in the religious market place. This accountability involves articulation of one’s faith in relation to the other and not in the privacy of one’s sanctuaries. Proselytism, evangelism and witness, call it what you will, is an unavoidable aspect of social and religious life. That said, whether “organized” or “strategized,” proselytizing activities that target people or groups of people (“reaching the unreached”) – whether undertaken by mission societies, churches, Mosques or Islamic centers – remain a legitimate issue for further discussion. Perhaps the era of “global mission,” supported and sponsored by mission societies and agencies, has come to an end, and the overly optimistic claim of the Edinburgh Conference, “Evangelization of the world in our generation,” will forever be an unfulfilled prophecy. The age of pluralism and the globalization of religions may have put the brakes on Christian assault of the religious and cultural space of others. Nonetheless, a more sober and critical assessment of the meaning of Christian mission and evangelism in a pluralistic age will continue to be on the Christian agenda as we commemorate the centenary of the Edinburgh conference of 1910.