

Human Rights and the Ethics of Christian Proselytizing in Foreign Contexts

Proselytizing, especially Christian proselytizing in foreign contexts has come under much fire of late. Some recent indications of the growing discontent with proselytizing include India's anti-conversion movement and Sri Lanka's pending "Act to Safe Guard Religious Freedom" which states, "No person shall convert or attempt to convert or aid or abet acts of conversion of another to a different religion."¹ This is not to say that misgivings and resentment about proselytizing haven't been prevalent since at least the Middle Ages. However, there has been a subtle shift in the modern view of proselytism. It seemed that always before, the objections were against methods of proselytizing (forced baptisms, crusaders and such). However, in the last two decades or so, there have arisen cries against any form of proselytism—usually characterized as "forcing one's beliefs" upon others. Christians have had some very black moments in which power overrode love, and despicable methods of proselytizing were employed. However, today proselytizing is not being objected to on the basis of the method. Today, the objections are to the mere attempt to persuade others to accept Christian views. The very act is seen as unethical, and if proselytizing is unethical, then the thought of Americans or Europeans proselytizing in foreign countries is considered even worse.

The Constraints of the Argument

This paper concentrates on the ethics of proselytizing as an activity of persuasion. I will not address, except in passing, Christianity's long history of violence and blatantly coercive activities. I do not mean to whitewash the past, but the philosophical objections I want to address would be substantive apart from those horrid moments. Those who raise these specific objections, I think, would argue that proselytizing in whatever form

constitutes “forcing your beliefs on others.” If they are right, the objections carry all of their bite *whether or not* there was any history of Christian violence and exploitation in the past

Also, if Christianity’s past is a side issue, so is its future. By this I mean that all of these objections would still have force even if all the consequences of proselytizing actually turned out to be very good or very bad. In other words, if evangelism eventually created a peaceable kingdom, I suspect very few of the proselytizing opponents would accept evangelism as an ethical activity.²

Lastly, while Christian evangelism is the paradigm, I should also note that the ethics of proselytizing I am advocating would be applicable for defending other religious persuasion and indeed other kinds of persuasion in general (i.e. political persuasion).

Defining Some Terms

I want to defend traditional proselytizing as an ethical activity that celebrates human dignity. Therefore measures to prohibit evangelism such as Sri Lanka’s legislation are unnecessary and unethical. Before we look at the ethical objections to proselytizing, it would be helpful to define our terms. By proselytizing, I mean any act that seeks to persuade people to adopt a belief or set of beliefs that would affect their way of life. Religious commitment has the effect of not only changing one’s beliefs but one’s morals, allegiances, and often customs. Thus it is something that affects the whole person. The proselytizing I have mainly in mind here is the evangelism that Christians engage in which they seek to convince people of other religions that the tenets of Christianity are true and that everyone should believe and follow the teachings of Jesus. As such I will use “proselytizing” and “evangelism” interchangeably.

The modern objections to evangelistic persuasion of this kind often include charges that all proselytizing is coercive at worst and exploitive at best. These are three other terms we need to define. What is the difference between a coercive, an exploitive, and a persuasive offer?

Coercion is normally defined as a situation in which A manipulates B's circumstances to ensure that the alternative to doing A's will is intolerable.³ An example of pure coercion would be blackmail. One person creates a situation in which another must do his will or face an unacceptable alternative: disclosure of some information that would harm. Another important point is that the alternative to the offer must be unacceptable not just uncomfortable. The famous casting couch, while being despicable, isn't coercive. The alternative to not sleeping with the director is not hunger or destitution or even unemployment, its just not getting an acting job.

An exploitive offer is a bit harder to pin down. Here person A making the offer does not create the unacceptable/vicious alternative but they clearly take advantage of it in order to manipulate B to do their will. The "taking advantage of" property is dependent on notions of intent. Normally the intent is for personal gain.⁴ Thus price gouging for building materials during a major disaster is exploitive because the company gains profit for its own benefit. With all that in mind, are traditional acts of evangelism coercive or exploitive or are they merely persuasive?

While there are many different kinds of persuasive acts that count as proselytizing, most of them can be broken down into a few examples. For the sake of simplicity let's classify four types of foreign proselytizing:

- 1) Proselytizing while providing humanitarian aid

- 2) Proselytizing while providing education
- 3) Bible studies and Church Planting
- 4) Bible translating and distribution

1) and 2) differ from 3) and 4) in that they are attempts to persuade that coincide (not necessarily depend on) some other altruistic offer of benefit. These are what we will call mixed offers. This is different from 3) and 4) in that the persuasion in these cases are not mixed with any other benefit to the one being proselytized. Intuitively it seems that mixed offers like proselytizing while offering aid or education would be the strongest candidates for the charge of exploitation. So let's see if they are indeed exploitive.

We have already determined that mixed offers are not explicitly coercive unless the offer was tied to some requirement and the alternative to accepting the offer would be unacceptable and therefore unethical. However, an exploitive offer is such that the evangelistic party need not create the situation but merely take advantage of it. Is it exploitive to offer food while at the same time subjecting the hungry to attempts to persuade them to accept Christianity?

First, I know of no example of evangelical proselytizing that engages in full-blown persuasive argument for Christianity while at the same time offering humanitarian aid. That does not mean there isn't one. Most of what is called proselytizing in regard to aid is a simple, "Jesus loves you and that is why I am giving you this food," or some such.

Second, exploitation has with it the connotation of personal profit. In other words in exploitative offers there is usually the idea that the exploitation garners the guilty party some personal benefit and to gain that benefit is the intent of the exploitation. Thus the

director gains sexual gratification for himself as he exploits the employment environment of Hollywood when he propositions the actress for sex. The hotel gains increased profits when it raises its prices when it exploits the destruction after a hurricane. There is a subtle difference in the case of proselytizing. Here we have exploitation, if it is exploitation, with the ostensible motive of providing something good for the exploited by taking advantage of the situation and no ostensible personal gain for the proselytizer. Now there are those who would argue that the gain for the evangelical proselytizer is some sort of personal satisfaction or renown for saving souls. However such a gain would be garnered regardless of whether or not that was the motive. If we are to discount any aid as exploitive if it produces a gain of satisfaction for the aid giver, then purely non-sectarian acts are just as exploitive, for presumably there is a level of personal satisfaction and renown received even by the most secular altruism. This would make every act of charity exploitive.⁵

Now is there any difference between an offer mixed with aid and an offer mixed with education? It seems that the same conditions are present. The exploitation, if it can be called that, is to take advantage of a situation, that of poor education, in order to provide a good to the uneducated. True, there may be even greater forms of self-satisfaction tied to the act of teaching, but there is also a more lasting good tied to an education as opposed to a hand out of food. In other words, if an offer tied to food isn't exploitive in the traditional sense then *a fortiori* neither is an offer tied to education.

Now if mixed proselytizing isn't exploitive in itself, it seems that pure acts of proselytizing such as bible studies and bible distribution would be even harder to charge with exploitation since there is no unacceptable alternative presented to the target of the

persuasive offer. If a foreign national doesn't accept the offer it doesn't present her with anything but continuing her life as it was.⁶

What we have shown is that none of our four kinds of proselytizing are coercive or exploitive *in themselves*. Instead what we have are four acts that are merely persuasive. But, the opponent of proselytizing might object, "All you have proven is that persuasion, mixed and pure, about *anything* is not coercive or exploitive. There could be factors about the nature of Christian belief itself or the nature of the target culture that would turn your innocent proselytizing into an unethical act." Are there factors specifically about Christian belief or issues of human culture that would render these acts of persuasion unethical where other acts of persuasion would not be? There are in fact three major objections along this line. What they all have in common is that they argue there are factors unique to religious proselytizing, (or specifically Christian proselytizing) that make such actions unethical.

1) *The Pluralism objection*, which states that proselytizing, is unethical because all religions are paths to the spiritual and to argue for one above others is unethical coercion. 2) *The Cultural objection*, which states that Christian proselytizing is inexorably tied to Western culture and any proselytizing of non-Westerners is unethical coercion of culture 3) *The Psychological objection*, which states that proselytizing is taking advantage of people when they are weak, vulnerable, and not able to defend against such coercion. I will deal with the first two of these briefly only because more than adequate philosophical work has been done by others on these. The Psychological objection is relatively new territory and so I will spend the majority of my time on this argument.

The Pluralism Objection

What I call the pluralism objection states that traditional Christian proselytizing is unethical because all religions ultimately point to the same spiritual truth and to aggrandize one faith over another is to commit an unethical act of hubris. This objection targets the nature of any religion that claims exclusivity to the truth. Joseph Runzo says,

Ethically, Religious Exclusivism has the morally repugnant result of making those who have privileged knowledge, or who are intellectually astute, a religious elite, while penalizing those who happen to have no access to the putatively correct religious view, or who are incapable of advanced understanding.⁷

One of the most outspoken proponents of this Pluralism objection is the late philosopher John Hick. Hick says that when religious belief takes on the mantle of exclusive claims of truth, “its sense of its own validity and worth is expressed in doctrines implying an exclusive or a decisively superior access to the truth or the power to save.”⁸ It is clear that Christianity indeed makes the claim that its tenets are in fact true and that Christianity is the only belief set with the power to justify before God. Christianity gets this mandate from Jesus’ statement that “I am the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the father except through me.”⁹ This is clearly an exclusivist claim. Note that both Hick and Runzo’s objections refer to the holding of Christian belief as exclusive. In other words Hick and Runzo assert that merely holding this exclusive religious belief is itself arrogant and repugnant. Therefore, it is assumed that proselytizing is even more repugnant.

By Hick’s lights, Christianity qualifies as exclusivist and therefore injurious. Hick’s argument against exclusive claims stems from his understanding of the nature of God. God, for Hick is the ineffable “real” that cannot be described by any positive doctrine. According to Hick the only properties we can apply to God are logical

properties (self-identity, non-contradiction) or negative properties (not finite, not a horse etc.) Since we cannot know God in his nature, we can only describe God as we can conceive of God related to our cultures and lives. Thus all religious expressions are equally valid because all religious expressions fall equally short of the “real” nature of God.¹⁰ These expressions do relate to the divine in one important way, the ethical. “All religions have the benefit of providing an ethical element of transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.”¹¹ Presumably this means that what makes religions in any way substantive is that through promoting virtues of other-centeredness it is closer to what God favors. So to the extent that religions promote altruism, charity, etc., they are being transformed into something the Divine favors. It follows that any religious tradition that claims to be THE expression of God, is *prima facie* asserting a privilege that cannot under any circumstances be true because no expression can ever be a positive claim about God and to the extent that religions foster selflessness they are legitimate.

In rebuttal to this argument it should be noted first that Christianity never “claims” specifically to be the sole possessor of truth. Its founder did claim to be the sole means to the truth that leads to salvation. However, this is not a claim, per se, of exclusivity. The property of exclusivity is necessarily attached to any claim when confronted with its opposite. If Christianity claims *p* is true, all religions that claim *not-p* must be false. In other words if Christianity is making claims about the matters of fact, such claims are always exclusive because of the nature of logic *not* the nature of the Christian claim. Hick would respond that Christianity cannot make claims about God because no such properties can ever express the divine. Only negative and logical

properties can be attributed to God. Therefore Christianity's claims are misdirected; there is no positive fact to which they can claim knowledge of. But even if this were true, how does the Christian assertion that in Hick's mind is false, automatically mean that it is either coercive or exploitive, as we have defined those terms? I cannot not see how a putative false claim necessarily translates into a coercive or exploitive claim.

Second, As Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, the claim that no positive properties can be attributed to God is extremely problematic. Plantinga argues that by Hick's lights, the divine has several positive properties necessarily.¹² If we accept Hick's theology, then there is at least one positive property of God. God is ethical. And it is not just the case that God has values, but God favors traditional concepts of morality such as selflessness and helping others because it is these values that are the element in all legitimate religious expression that draws humans closer to God.¹³

Third, the charge of arrogance seems to be what Plantinga calls a "tar baby" in the sense that if the Pluralist uses such an argument; it can be turned back on the pluralist. The pluralist argument seems to be 1) The religious exclusivist holds a position that others disagree with, 2) even though she knows this, she continues to believe in this exclusive right to truth, 3) She is arrogant or egotistical preferring her beliefs to others."¹⁴ But if this is true then the pluralist is guilty of the same arrogance because the pluralist holds a belief about the way things are (i.e. "There are no positive properties attributable to God") and the pluralist knows there are millions of religious believers who disagree. Yet it is the pluralist who harbors the same claim to exclusive truth. Is the pluralist guilty of the same arrogance? By the pluralist argument, he is. The pluralist has attached to his doctrine the same odor of exclusivity that the religious exclusivist is charged with having.

But there is nothing wrong with this. The pluralist is entitled to her exclusive claim just as much as the religious exclusivist. The arrogance charge is merely an inflammatory red herring. Further, what goes for religious belief seems to go for religious persuasion. What holds for belief holds with all the more force to persuasion to believe.¹⁵ The pluralism objection cannot be attached to religious proselytizing without attaching it to the pluralism doctrine itself.

The Cultural Objection

The second objection states that Christianity is inexorably tied to Western, frequently American, culture and thus any effort to proselytize is forcing Western culture onto the person being proselytized. Christian evangelism is merely a tool or a veneer for Western imperialism. This attack against proselytizing is voiced strongly by Hindus in India, which has a long and bloody struggle with conversion. Because leaders like Gandhi historically linked Indian identity to the Hindu religion, conversion has been and is seen as cultural violence and political manipulation. An anti-conversion organization called “Indians Against Christian Aggression” which excerpts articles and stories that support anti-conversion movements, quotes Major T.R. Vendantam:

The Motivation for Christian evangelism is simple. Disrupt and destroy. The Missions make no secret of it. It is a mistake to think that Christian missionary enterprise is a religious movement. The Christians themselves never claimed it to be a religious movement. It was a declaration of war and an attack on the religious and cultural set up of the people of Asia and Africa, and it was always politically motivated.¹⁶

This is not a new charge. It was leveled against David Livingston who argued that English culture and the Christian message both would transform Africa.¹⁷ It is also true that colonialism and Christianity were inseparable in much of Church history. Is the Christian gospel inseparable from Western culture? Can evangelism ever extricate itself

from its Western cultural and political baggage? Interestingly enough, it is a voice from one of these colonialized cultures that argues that Christian mission can and does flourish in ways that don't attach Western imperialism. Lamin Sanneh, a native of Gambia and professor at Yale Divinity School, argues that Christian belief in Africa particularly has extricated itself from the colonialism that accompanied the original Christian mission and has developed a vital and wonderful expression of Christianity that is both faithful to Jesus' teachings and undeniably African.¹⁸ Indeed, if Christianity gains its power from its Western political baggage, then when the Western influence is removed, the Christian mission should dwindle. But in fact that is not the case. Sanneh reports that when the colonial elements left Africa, Christianity did not dwindle; it thrived.¹⁹ Christian doctrine was born with ties middle-eastern culture. From the moment Jesus commanded his followers to "make disciples of all nations," Christianity has faced the problem of proselytizing in foreign contexts. The book of Acts gives testament to how Christian belief has been packaged in many different ways in order to translate into first the Greek culture, then the Roman, and finally European.²⁰ The history of Christianity is one of constantly changing methods to translate a core of unchanging belief.

I have no doubt that evangelism has been used as a tool of Western culture and that Christian mission has been compromised by getting itself involved with foreign politics, but from such a past, it does not follow that all evangelism leads to Westernized colonialism. As I said, my intuition is that even if Christianity did not have such a dark past, it would still be objected that Christianity is unethical because it forces others to abandon their cultural identity. What Sanneh shows is that while there are some elements of culture such as idol worship that are incompatible with Christianity; culture is not

obliterated with the adoption of Christianity, but rather culture evolves and expands to create new expressions of faith. Therefore since at least Christian evangelism is trans-cultural, it cannot be unethical simply because the evangelists come from Western cultures.

The Psychological Objection

The Psychological objection states that religious persuasion is unethical because it preys on the weak, the vulnerable, and those that are not equipped to defend themselves against what they deem are coercive tactics. An assumption here is that any persuasion that causes someone to change something fundamental about him or her is a kind of harm—specifically a psychological harm. The question then becomes whether or not the harm is worth it. The argument goes that depending on the results or the nature of the change, a particular act of persuasion is ethical or unethical. Religious persuasion is seen as not worth it because the harm outweighs any benefits. This is especially true if the objector is a pluralist who thinks there is no exclusive truth in regard to religious belief.

A second assumption is that to confront someone with an alternate way of believing is to assume a position of superiority. Exclusive truth is seen as arrogant and egotistical especially if there is no objective truth to be believed. Rajiv Malhotra in an address to Cornell University said: “. . . The language of proselytizing is explicitly one of hatred and implicitly one of racism, with the tone of the superior talking down to the inferior people.”²¹ Malhotra quotes Shelby Spong: “ All evangelical and missionary activities designed to convert the heathen are base born. They are expressions of our sense of superiority and our hostility toward those who are different.”²²

I want to take exception to the assumption that persuasion is psychological harm and that religious persuasion, in the form of proselytizing, fosters arrogance and indignity. To the contrary, it is in accepting or rejecting persuasion that human autonomy sees one of its greatest expressions. If I am right, then the right to listen to and reject religious persuasion is an important part of individual freedom. Contrary to the objector's goal of protecting individual identity, to outlaw proselytizing on the grounds that people who are weak, sick etc., are made too vulnerable to mental manipulation by proselytizing is to actually disparage human autonomy and strip persons of a vital part of human identity—the right to refuse persuasion. The psychological objection, which seeks to preserve human dignity, actually ends up weakening the concept of human dignity.

From what I can gather from Malhotra and Spong's statements, it is the charge of exclusivity that makes Christian evangelism guilty. But as we saw earlier any claim about facts is necessarily exclusive. Malhotra's claim is exclusive. Those who disagree are seen as wrong—not only wrong, but hateful. Does this mean that Malhotra is claiming a status of being superior? Could the evangelical charge him with hatred since he at various times accuses Christianity of being, imperialistic, violent, opportunistic, and deceitful.²³ Why are these sentiments not hate speech while statements that those who disagree with Christianity are “wrong,” “in darkness,” “in bondage to false gods,” are?²⁴ The only difference that I can find is that Malhotra believes is that Christian theism is false. I can only assume that is the case when he engages in his own proselytizing attempting to convince us of Hindu doctrine of pantheism and pluralism is a remedy to Christian Exclusivism.²⁵ He aggressively argues that we should adopt this pluralistic stance as opposed to the exclusive stance of evangelicalism. So evangelicals are in the position of

darkness (a metaphor for not seeing the truth) with regard to the way things really are. Does this mean that Malhotra is unethical for trying to persuade evangelicals? Of course not. He is just as entitled to persuade as the Christians he's objecting to.

Molhotra and Spong object to superiority. Is superiority something that can be avoided? What is going on here is that because there is no truth of the matter, any disagreement or dissent is seen as taking a position of superiority. Now, if there is no fact of the matter then any arbitrary elevation of one proposition over another would be an unfair superiority. However, if pluralism isn't true, then there is a fact of the matter (universally) and if one party is correct then the other isn't. Being correct means logically that the party asserting the opposite is incorrect and in a sense that is a kind of superiority, albeit not a moral one. Christianity is not any guiltier of a superior attitude than its objectors.

Second, is protecting the poor and the vulnerable in foreign countries by outlawing proselytizing, as Gandhi wanted to do, really saving them from indignity?²⁶ Within the debate about free will and determinism is an effort to preserve the element of human choice. Both libertarians and soft-determinists want to preserve the individual's sense of free choice. (Only the hard determinist wants to dismiss individual choice as an illusion.) At the heart of this is the intuition that when a human being faces a choice and chooses what is in her best interests and help pursue her goals, she is exhibiting a quality that makes one expressly human. Human dignity implies that a person has the capacity to decide in accord with his own life plan. A strong tradition in philosophy has argued that any definition of person includes the ability to form plans and accept or reject offers to adjust that plan. Robert Nozick says it is the quality of being able to form life pursuits

and make decisions for those pursuits that makes someone human and not animal.²⁷ John Stuart Mill argued that it is the act of listening to arguments and mustering the mental wherewithal to reject social persuasion are crucial to a conception of individual liberty.²⁸

What I am asserting is that a person is never more fully being human than when confronted with a persuasive offer; they weigh the arguments and decide to accept or reject based on their individual liberty to do so. This is especially the case with religious persuasion. Lamin Sanneh says:

Belief premised on persuasion fosters the spirit of freedom and tolerance, while suppression, or imposition of belief suffocates the spirit. That's why the church teaches conversion on the grounds that no one can be saved against his or her will. Conversion makes the means of personal persuasion consonant with the end of personal integrity.²⁹

The implications of Sanneh's statements are startling. Allowing evangelists to persuade foreign natives and giving these natives a chance to accept or respectfully reject such persuasion is a celebration of liberty. Conversely to engage in global paternalism by calling for the suppression of evangelism is really to relegate the poor and so-called vulnerable to the status of ignorant, weak-willed fools who don't know any better. Their savage minds cannot defend against the persuasive abilities of the slick evangelists. Indeed, *The Indians Against Christian Aggression* compares the natives who convert to Christianity while being given mixed offers of humanitarian aid and evangelism to prostitutes.³⁰ This seems to argue that the opponents of proselytizing surreptitiously have a dim view of the native population as weak persons who do not have the fortitude to deny persuasive arguments while the persuasive evangelists are the ones who have a strong respect for autonomy.

What I am advocating here is a very robust view of human autonomy. I am arguing that inherent in all rational beings is a measure of strength to weigh the

arguments and evidence of a persuasive offer and to exhibit the autonomy to reject the offer or accept it. It is in fact impossible to force belief at all. It is a fact of human psychology that some persons will exhibit more or less of this inner strength, but a part of being human--of having a life plan--is forming and rejecting beliefs related to that plan. There is a uniquely human capacity to weigh persuasive offers and decide whether to adjust one's life to commitment to a belief system.

Towards an Ethics of Proselytizing

I have argued in this paper that religious persuasion in general, and Christian evangelism in particular, is not coercive or exploitive in itself. Such actions are not *prima facie* unethical. This is not to say that proselytizing as I have described it cannot become exploitive or coercive or that there have not been attitudes and procedures that have made some specific proselytizing efforts unethical. Once again I have no doubt that some of the horrible stories told by opponents to proselytizing are true—that missionaries have bribed or deceived people in order to get their conversion on record. This is cause to condemn particular acts of proselytizing, not to infringe on liberty by outlawing all attempts to convert. I will conclude this paper by offering some suggestions for how to formulate an ethics of proselytizing that is sensitive to human dignity while also preserving proselytizing.

What we learn from examining the philosophical objections can help us formulate some principles for an ethics of proselytizing. The opponents of proselytizing legitimately worry that there is a danger that those engaged in proselytizing will treat people as objects. It is perhaps trite to suggest a guiding principle for ethical proselytizing that is age old: *Proselytizers should treat non-believers as ends and not mere means to an*

end. This of course is a version of Kant's categorical imperative. It is useful here to remind us that dignity and respect means never treating foreign nationals as if their salvation and commitment to religious belief were a mere tool for the evangelist's rather than the foreign national's gain in the kingdom of God. How do we expand that general principle into some specific directions?

In order to keep from even the appearance of exploitation, when offering mixed persuasive offers such as offering humanitarian aid, health care, and education, *Proselytizers should make every effort to make their intentions clear.* That is, there should be a higher standard of transparency in foreign mission. Proselytizers must make it clear that they are not trading aid for conversion. There is no *quid pro quo*. This means that if a person wants to accept our help and refuse our persuasion then we must honor that in order to honor their status as ends in themselves.

One of the charges against mixed offers is that it creates what Dr. Gustavo Crocker calls "rice Christians" that make some shallow profession of faith in order to keep getting fed.³¹ This possibility necessitates a second principle: *Christian mission should define conversion as something evidenced by a life lived.* Christians should think of conversion as something that happens as a person gradually draws closer to faith.³² In order to encourage this understanding, mission organizations should not define success in terms of numbers who have made a commitment to the Christian faith. Mission should be thought of in terms of the impact missionaries have on those around them not how many have accepted the doctrine.³³

Finally, if my assessment of a human autonomy is correct, it produces another principle: *Respect for individual freedom means respect for an individuals' rational*

choices. This means that proselytizers owe evidential arguments to foreign persons when we evangelize them. Respecting human autonomy means that we should not trick them or whitewash the arguments for and against a viewpoint. In order for a foreign national to make an informed decision, we must offer them reasons that Christianity is true not just that Christianity is kinder than the regime they find themselves in.

¹ Manpreet Singh, "Cracking Down on Conversions," *Christianity Today* (September, 2004), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/009/2.23.html [available October 25, 2004].

² If we set up a consequentialist principle that since the consequences of proselytizing are more often bad than good, we should refrain from proselytizing, we fall pray to all the problems with consequentialism including how do you calculate the good and bad consequences of proselytizing (notoriously difficult), and weighing the lack of dissent against the oppression of free speech and will. Further such a consequentialist principle would seem to entail too much. With such a principle you could justify silencing all religious speech (or conceivably worship) on the grounds that it has a history of producing consequences that are more dire than helpful. I don't think many of the opponents to proselytizing would accept an argument that would have the consequence of that kind of coercive limit on liberal virtues.

³ Cf. F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 133-4, and Thomas A. Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty, *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

⁴ Consider the recent objections to evangelical efforts in Iraq where missionaries and aid workers are charged with exploiting Iraq's violent upheaval for evangelical gain, Mark O'Keefe, "Mixing Iraq Aid and The Gospel Stirs Debate," *Christianity Today.com* (March 31, 2003) www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/113/52.0.html [available October 25, 2004].

⁵ It would also require that in order to decide if an offer of food mixed with an evangelistic effort we would be required to know the intent of the offer and knowing psychological states is problematic at best and very time consuming.

⁶ It might be objected that the alternative for the national is damnation if they don't accept the offer. However, the threat of damnation only carries weight if and only if they buy into the Christian belief that there is such a state of damnation. It is significant that nowhere in the book of Acts do we find threat of eternal judgment in any argument for accepting the truth of Christianity. It may be that Hell is a theological concept that requires much background doctrine to really be understood in context of a Christian idea of divine justice.

⁷ "God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism," *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 4 (October 1988): 343.

⁸ "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," *Religious Pluralism*, ed. Leroy Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 197.

⁹ John 14:6.

¹⁰ *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 239.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴ "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 193.

¹⁵ This is at least the case in Christianity where the belief set includes the injunction to persuade others. This does bring up the relation between belief and persuasion. Is there an obligation inherent in strong belief? One could believe something without persuading. While this case can be made; it can't be made consistently by the pluralist who aggressively argues we should be pluralists.

¹⁶ “The Church as a Tool of Imperialism,” quoted in “Indians Against Christian Aggression” website: www.kentaxrecords.com/iaca/php/item_display.php?id=1097763923&type=articles, [available October 16, 2004]

¹⁷ Cf. George Seaver, *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), 240-5.

¹⁸ See especially Sanneh’s description of the Masai development of their own Christian Creed. *Whose Religion is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: The William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 58-9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰ I realize there are those that argue that the teachings of Jesus bear no resemblance to what we call “Christianity” and that Paul is chiefly responsible for altering Christian teaching beyond that of its founder. See Ronald Nash’s *Gospel and the Greeks: Did The New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* (P&R Publishing, 2003), for a refutation of this oversimplification.

²¹ “The Ethics of Proselytizing” address to the Cornell University Conference on “Human Rights and Religion” November 8, 2000, www.infinityfoundation.com/ECITproselytizing.htm. [available 10/16/04]

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ According to Indians Against Christian Aggression, “During his meetings with Christian missionaries, Mahatma Gandhi had said that they were doing social service with the ulterior motive of conversions. He asked them to give up this offensive program. He also said to them that if this situation continued in a free India he would ask the foreign missionaries to leave the country.” “Conversion Tactics: Charity,” www.kentaxrecords.com/iaca/tactics_charity.htm.

²⁷ “Moral Constraints and the State,” *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (Basic Books, 1974), 30-3.

²⁸ “On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), 35-8.

²⁹ *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 46.

³⁰ www.kentaxrecords.com/iaca/tactics_charity.htm [available 10/16/04]

³¹ Joe Miracle, “Regent Alum Dr. Gustavo Crocker organizes humanitarian aid to Iraq,” *Regent News*, July 28, 2003, www.regent.edu/news/crocker_gustavo.html [available 10/16/2004].

³² There is something to be said for the policy of the early church to suspend baptism for a period of time to insure the convert’s commitment to the faith is not merely a shallow decision.

³³ This is not to say evangelicals cannot ethically rejoice when as in the book of Acts, “three thousand were added,” (Acts 2). However, it is noteworthy that in Acts, the numbers of conversions are not emphasized. In fact after this declaration in chapter 2, no specific numbers are stated and the reports of conversion are given in vague generalities.

“Human Rights and the Ethics of Proselytizing in Foreign Contexts”

Jonathan K. Miles

Presented to the Lilly Fellows Conference on
Christianity and Human Rights

November 11-14, 2004

Samford University

Birmingham, Alabama