

Proselytism vs. Evangelism:

Critical Question for the Global Church

Roger S. Greenway

Crises Confronting Members of the Global Church

In many parts of the world, Christian communities are facing opposition and persecution. In some cases, their very survival is at stake. Assessments are complicated by the fact that particular cases often involve not only religious differences but also political, economic, racial and ethnic factors. Consider the following examples:

Indonesia

"Last Christmas Eve (Dec.24, 2000), bombs exploded in or near six churches in Jakarta. Three churches in Mojokerto were

Dr. Roger S. Greenway is Professor Emeritus of World Missiology at Calvin Theological Seminary. He received his degrees from Calvin Theological Seminary(B.A., B.D., Th.M.) and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary(Th.D.). He has also served as a missionary in Sri Lanka and Mexico.

bombed and eight in Medan. Police were able to defuse or explode some bombs harmlessly. However, in the city of Pekanbaru, four police officers died while trying to remove a package left in a church there... Security had been heightened for the Christmas Eve worship services, but many bombs were placed in vehicles near the churches. Others were wrapped to look like gifts and were not noticed among other packages.”¹⁾

The Molucan Islands were once known as the spice Islands, with a population that was largely Christian. But in the past decade, the Suharto government relocated thousands of Muslims to the Molucas, and the islanders have now experienced open violence for almost two years. Recently the Muslim organization, Laskar Jihad, threatened to kill all residents on the small island of Nusalaut, where about 7,500 Christians lived. They also threatened the neighboring island of Ambalau, whose population was mainly Muslim, when they refused to join in any attacks in Nusalaut.²⁾

“Report of forced conversions and forced circumcision have emerged from the Molucas. On November 23 and 24, 2000, Muslim jihad forces attacked the islands of Kesui and Temor. After initial attacks, they took about 1,000 surviving Christians to mosques. Their captors forced them under threat of death to undergo conversion rituals. Many died after witnessing the murder of a school teacher who refused. On December 3 and 4, both men and women were forced to be circumcised. Their captors did this without painkiller or antiseptic, though the women were allowed to bathe in the ocean to cleanse their wounds.”³⁾

Observations: (1) The Suharto government, for whatever

1) *REC News Exchange*, Vol. X X X VIII, No.1. January 2001, p. 3.

2) *Ibid.*

3) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

reasons, set the stage for the current situation when it relocated thousands of Muslims into a traditionally Christian area.

(2) At this time the Indonesian government appears to be powerless to end the strife. "Military units sent to the scattered group of about 1,000 islands have instead joined the fighting-- usually on the Muslim side-- while police have often sided with the Christians. At times, soldiers and police officers have fought and killed one another."⁴⁾

(3) There is evidence that forces from outside Indonesia are involved in the raids against Christians. "Identity cards found in the bodies of some white-robed jihad warriors show that they came from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East."⁵⁾

(4) The conflict in Indonesia is especially tragic because until recently the country (88% Muslims and 9% Christians) had a reputation for toleration. It illustrates a key issue that we will return to later, of how a nation or a society views toleration, whether toleration is seen as a virtue or a vice, and what happens when the spirit of toleration is pushed too far. It also illustrates the dreadful consequences when radical forces from outside a country stir up trouble between religious groups that traditionally tolerated one another.

(5) What can Christians from outside Indonesia do on behalf of their fellow believers? "Indonesia chafes especially raw at foreign interference, and contacting the government in Jakarta could worsen the plight of the Christians in the Maluku Islands who are suffering for their faith." A preferable route is to contact the Indonesian embassy in Washington, DC, and urge that gov-

4) "Purified in the Name of Allah," by Richard C. Paddock, *Times*, Staff Writer. March 2001.

5) *Ibid.*

ernment to do all it can to stop jihad forces from outside Indonesia from entering the country.⁶⁾

India

Christianity continues to grow in India, and as it does so it challenges the cultural and political powers, flamed by nationalism. Two things are happening simultaneously: (1) Evangelistic efforts on the part of Indian Christians are increasing; and (2) there is growing resistance, sometimes violent, against Christian activities. Radical Hindu nationalists resist both Christianity and Islam, labelling them as unwanted, foreign religions.

Joel Carpenter, provost at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, says the following in an article entitled *Christianity in the New Millennium*: "Indian nationalism is resurgent just now, and Hindu nationalist organizations have been emboldened in their denunciations of Christian evangelism and philanthropy. In this...climate, nationalist agitators have incited riots against churches. Last year [1999], Indian nuns were beaten, and an Australian missionary and his sons were trapped in their car and burned. Indian Christians seem bolder these days in reaching beyond their traditional strongholds, but as they enter areas of Hindu strength, they experience increased resentment and persecution."⁷⁾

At the present time, church leaders in India are upset at the treatment given to 14 million Christian dalits and 130 million Muslim Dalits, in the latest census taken by the Indian govern-

6) *Christianity Today*, April 23, 2001, p. 100.

7) *Perspectives*, January 2000, p. 9.

8) *REC News Exchange*, Vol. X X VIII, No.3, March 2001, p. 3.

ment.⁸⁾ The census, which is taken once every ten years, recognized three categories of Dalits (Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist) but ignored the two others because they are from “foreign” religions.

“We demand that the classification related to castes and tribes be delinked from religious categorization if the categorization does not include all religions” said the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) in a statement on February 23, 2001. Further, they said that they were “appalled at the manner in which the present census is being conducted excluding Dalits who do not belong to the Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist faiths.” Protest has centered around a question on the census which states that “Scheduled Castes (Dalits) can only be Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists.”

“A Dalit is a low-caste Indian that in recent years has recently begun to receive recognition of rights in the eyes of the Indian government. Already the Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist Dalits have been granted rights that improve their social status. Muslim and Christian Dalits have yet to be granted those same rights... “Archbishop Vincent Concessao, vice-president of the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of India (CBCI) believes that the question in the census violates that fundamental freedom to profess, practice, and propagate the religion of one’s choice under the Indian constitution.”⁹⁾

Sri Lanka

I cannot resist a reference to Sri Lanka, because my wife and I were missionaries to Sri Lanka from 1958 to 1963. The population of Sri Lanka is largely Buddhist and in a sense we fell vic-

9) *Ibid.*

tims to the Buddhist revival of that period that pressured the government to stop all missionary activity by foreigners. Traditionally, Sri Lankan Buddhists displayed a relatively high degree of toleration toward Christianity and other religions. The civil war that has raged in Sri Lanka for the past decade has been political and racial in nature, not particularly religious.

However, in the last few years there has been a stiffening of resistance to anything non-Buddhist. Earlier this year there was a bloody attack on Christians right in the center of the country. On Sunday, February 18, 2001 a mob attacked the Sanasum Sevana (New Life) Church, leaving 25 people injured, three of them seriously.¹⁰⁾ "The attack took place in two stages. The first round was when masked men stormed the church just after midnight on Saturday and smashed up the church building and property. The second attack happened in the morning as the pastor and believers were coming to worship. The mob was armed with swords and iron rods... and [when the attack was over] only the walls and roof remained."¹¹⁾

Sri Lanka's president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, ordered an investigation, and church officials have urged Christians not to over-react. But there is reason for serious concern, because this attack was not an isolated incident. It appears to be part of a wider movement to frighten Christians into social isolation. Militant Buddhists want Christians to stop all forms of evangelism and social service, and move out of areas where their numbers are small. In a comment on the incident, Sri Lanka's deputy minister of foreign affairs, Harendra Korea, said that "for centuries harmony and amity have prevailed in the country

10) *REC News Exchange*, Vol. X X X VIII, No.3, March 2001, p. 3.

11) *Ibid.*

among different religious communities. But today a certain organized movement is engaged in sowing the seeds of religious conflict in the name of championing the cause of Sinhala heritage.”¹²⁾ He was referring to a new political party, Sinhala Urumaya, which is suspected to be behind the attack on Christians.

Afghanistan

In Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, promoting any religion other than Islam was a crime punishable by death. In 2001, the Taliban movement's top leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, warned his fellow countrymen that "Islam's enemies were trying to 'seduce' Muslims into converting to Judaism or Christianity. "All countrymen," he announced, are seriously notified that any Muslim Afghan will be sentenced to death if he accepts Christianity and has converted to this nullified religion or is seen inviting people to Christianity and Judaism as well as propagating and distributing their books." Taliban authorities ordered radio listeners to report any conversions among their acquaintances.¹³⁾

India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia are Asian countries in which freedom to profess, practice and propagate the religion of one's choice is denied or threatened in one way or another. Other examples from Asia are China, Viet Nam, Myanmar, North Korea, Bangladesh, Pakistan. Added to the list could be Central Asian nations such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

12) *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

13) Dean Alford, "Afghanistan's Taliban Promises Death to Missionaries, Converts" in *World Pulse*, March 16, 2001, p. 4.

Asia is not the only part of the world where religious liberty is in jeopardy and Christians are oppressed. Christians in Sudan face many forms of persecution. The Sudanese government continues to wage war against the Nuba people, many of whom are Christians. While the government in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, insists that the church is not persecuted in Sudan and that Christians are free to come and go and practice their religion, church leaders state that in reality it is very difficult and dangerous to preach the gospel or distribute Scripture in Sudan. Some persecution is physical--people are killed or tortured for no apparent reason--and sometimes persecution takes on different and more subtle forms. Permission to build new churches and schools are refused or endlessly delayed, and Christians are not allowed to help orphans, although Muslims receive such permission easily. Another way that problems are created is by interference with Christian children's education.¹⁴⁾ The intention of such forms of persecution is to encourage defection from Christianity and discourage anyone from converting to the Christian faith.

Surprise: Mexico!

Before moving on, I want to illustrate how the attitude of religious intolerance operates by mentioning Mexico. Mexico is a country I love -- we lived there for nearly a decade and two of our children were born in Mexico and carry Mexican passports. Roman Catholicism has long been the official religion of Mexico, and the government has official ties with the Vatican. Nevertheless, Protestantism is growing rapidly, and in some places its growth generates open and aggressive conflict. For

14) Compass Direct, reported in *REC News Exchange*, Vol. X X X VIII, No.5. May 2001, p. 4.

example, in the town of San Nicolas, in the State of Hidalgo, people who are not Catholics run the risk of going without water, electricity or a place to live. Even the right to be buried in the government-owned cemetery is denied them. Councilman Herberto Lugo has said that the community is prepared to execute to the letter the rule established in 1998 that denies rights to those who are not Catholics. Lugo acknowledges that the people of town enjoy a large measure of peace and goodwill between neighbors. Nevertheless, says this councilman, it is time to begin the expulsion of those who are not Catholic.¹⁵⁾

The trouble in the town of San Nicolas began in 1984 when a leader of the traditional Catholics, a man by the name of Ponciano Rodriguez, converted to the evangelical faith and founded the Iglesia Cristiana Independiente Pentecostes (Pentecostal Christian Independent Church) with 300 followers. Since March of this year (2001), 24 leaders of the Pentecostal group have had their electricity and water turn off. For the town leaders, reason for irritation are both religious and cultural. Many people from the area go off to the USA for periods of employment, and while in the USA they acquire new ideas about freedom and Protestant beliefs. When they return to Hidalgo, they talk to their friends and relatives and suggest changes that have potential for improving their lives. This threatens the traditional culture, which has the Catholic Church at its center, and leads to friction.¹⁶⁾

This example of religious intolerance from Mexico could be duplicated throughout the region, and it raises an interesting

15) Email circular letter from William Van Tol, Mexico City. April 23, 2001.

16) *Ibid.*

question. Why has Liberation Theology not, from its base among Catholic priests and theologians in Latin America, addressed the issue of religious intolerance in the region and promoted the value of religious freedom? Liberation theologians have roundly denounced the history of early Catholic missionaries who forcefully imposed their faith on the indigenous people and destroyed much of their native culture. That, theologians tell us, was a horrible example of religious intolerance. But today, the heirs of the missionary legacy whose intolerance the scholars decry, support clamping down on Mexicans and other Latin Americans who voluntarily wish to make changes in their traditional religion and culture. There is a serious contradiction here. One kind of religious intolerance has replaced another. It seems to me that the issue of religious freedom remains a challenge for those who espouse the so-called Theology of Liberation. They would do Latin American people an enormous service if they would promote an attitude of religious freedom throughout the region.¹⁷⁾

Critical Questions to Be Addressed

When we reflect on the global picture it strikes me that several critical questions need to be addressed:

(1) Hostility toward Christianity is growing in many places, even as the number of Christians is increasing. In some cases the hostility is a reaction to the increase in the number of Christians. Would it be healthier for the churches if they held back on evan-

17) Armando Lampe, "Theology of Liberation Facing the Challenge of Freedom of Religion in Latin America, in Exchange: *Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*," Vol.27, No4, 1998, p. 341).

gelism and limited themselves to the "biological" growth of Christian families whose children adopted their parents' faith?

(2) What is the difference between evangelism and proselytism, and what is there in evangelism that Christians need to embrace and protect, and things about proselytism that as a matter of principle Christians should avoid?

(3) If converting to Christianity carries with it such a severe price, even the threat of death in some places, is it ethical to engage in evangelism? Look at the disruptions caused by people changing their religion! Would it not be more ethical to leave Muslims as Muslims, etc., rather than cause trouble for them, their families and their communities?

(4) Is there reason to except intolerance in cultures shaped by religious perspectives that militate against toleration and freedom? These values mean one thing to Christians who belong to a tradition where toleration and freedom are values based on a biblical understanding of God who is beyond every culture, nation and race, and who created all humans with the capacity to think and make moral decisions, to know Him and be responsible to Him. But freedom and toleration look different in cultures shaped by different religious or philosophical frameworks. They may be seen more as signs of weakness rather than a strength, a threat to society's welfare rather than a benefit.¹⁸⁾

In his book, Max Stackhouse maintains: "When the first Hebrew bowed his head to an ethical God, beyond his own or any other culture, freedom was born. Freedom is a real possibility because there is God; because there is God, there is a basis for

18) Max L. Stackhouse, *Creeds, Society and Human Rights: A study in Three Cultures*. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984, pp.273-280.

real freedom - in this fundamental sense of relationship to something beyond determinate human capacities and human construction. But freedom finally has no metaphysical foundation in either Marxism-Leninism or Hinduism."¹⁹⁾

Vishal Mangalwadi, a leading Indian theologian today, takes a similar position in his book *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Postmodern Hindu*. (Landour, Mussoorie U.P., India: Nivedit Good Books Distributors, 1996). Mangalwadi argues that the missionary movement, both Protestant and Catholic, made an enormous contribution to the development of modern India by introducing the Christian worldview, with its central affirmation of one God, Creator of all, and the concepts of human dignity and responsibility, on the basis of which most of what is good in Indian society rests. Unfortunately, these benefits are fast eroding away, says Mangalwadi, as more and more Indian intellectuals adopt the thought patterns of postmodernism.

Evangelism Without Apology

On this last point I raise larger questions than I can address in this chapter. I stay with the question of how *proselytism* relates to *evangelism*, and whether Christian evangelism is in fact an ethical activity when it sometimes results in division, hostility and persecution.

1. Evangelism properly understood

Evangelism, as I understand it, is the communication of the

19) *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Good News about Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world, in ways that invite a decision either to believe in Him or reject Him. Inherent in my understanding of the gospel is that Jesus is the one and only Savior and Lord, and those who become His disciples give up their former gods and religious systems.

The goal of evangelism is, without question, *conversion* to Christ and *repentance* from all forms of idolatry. The Apostle Paul made this clear when he said that his call to missions was to “open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Christ]” (Acts 26:18).

When evangelism is defined in this way, it is not surprising that it is considered offensive and encounters opposition. But no matter how unpopular evangelism may be, Christians really have no choice in the matter. They ought not remain quiet about Jesus, nor should they change the definition of evangelism in order to make it more acceptable to non-Christians. It is important to remember that though Jesus was sinless and did nothing but good to people, He had bitter enemies who eventually crucified Him. Similarly, Christians throughout the centuries have been persecuted for witnessing to their faith, however good and moral the witness of their lives may have been. Therefore, we have to conclude that in evangelism Him people who reject Christ will always find the message about offensive, and they will sometimes lash out against those who love Christ and witness for Him.

2. Proselytism defined

Many people today use “proselytism” to refer to any and all

activities designed to witness to Jesus Christ. I have a problem with this broad use of the term. Proselytism, as I define it, differs from evangelism in both its character and its methods. Proselytism is any action aimed at winning converts to a group or movement by using methods that are deceitful or manipulative. On the basis of this definition, proselytizers are people who employ any method they can find to gain converts. They operate on the false principle that the end justifies the means.

Proselytizers often tell half-truths. They are clever at appealing to the emotions and exploiting muddled thinking. They put converts in bondage to their leaders and to the rules of the group. The most common motives behind proselytism are money, a desire to control others, and a burning conviction that everyone else is wrong..

One of the most common tricks of proselytizers is to offer poor people and people that are in distress some tangible benefits, like food, health care, schooling, and the like. Once they have these people in their clutches, proselytizers seek to control them as much as they can. Having said this, we must admit that some well-meaning evangelists have borrowed methods from proselytizers, and in so doing have given evangelism a bad reputation. It is important, therefore, that Christians distance themselves from the ways of proselytizers.

3. Ethical evangelism

Jesus commanded that the gospel be proclaimed to all peoples, but he insisted on using methods that were ethical. Jesus never forced people to accept Him, nor did He instruct His disciples to use methods designed to deceive people. Jesus openly and honestly told people what to expect if they followed Him. He did not stir their emotions in order to make them follow Him blindly and without thinking. Jesus clearly said that discipleship was

costly. It meant cutting ties to certain people and things that were not congruent with the faith. It meant bearing a cross (Luke 14:25-35).

The problems created by proselytism have been around for a long time. Already in the first century of the Christian era, Paul and the other apostles had to deal with people who were trying to advance that gospel by using deceitful and unethical means. Against the background of that particular problem, Paul assured the Corinthian Christians, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (II Corinthians 4:2). The implication was that certain other missionaries did not maintain the same standard, and Paul put a distance between himself and them. But even with high standards, Paul and the other apostles were not free from criticism and opposition (I Thess. 2:2-7).²⁰⁾

Ethical Guidelines for Evangelists in a Hostile World

Here are some guidelines for Christian evangelists who desire to maintain ethical integrity while defending and promoting the gospel in whatever society:

1. Make sure that your words and actions conform to the Word of God and are designed to please your Lord, and not necessarily your hearers.

20) Roger Greenway, *Go and Make Disciples*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1999, pp. 148-152.

2. Be humble, and treat everyone with dignity and respect, even those with whom you disagree on important matters.
3. Evangelism should not involve any kind of deception, manipulation or undue pressure.
4. Any suggestion that greed motivates the evangelist is entirely unacceptable. Never allow the impression that you or anyone else is making money from evangelism.
5. All the glory should go to God in evangelism, and no glory should be claimed by or given to the evangelists.
6. Godly evangelists are mainly concerned for the welfare of the people they serve, and they hesitate to demand their own personal rights.
7. The love and gentleness of Jesus is seen and felt in true evangelists.
8. The basis of true evangelism is love for one's neighbors. a love that seeks their highest good and welfare in this world and the next.²¹⁾

In Christian evangelism, the end never justifies the means. We must be gentle in the way we proclaim spiritual information so powerful that it can make eternal changes in the hearts and lives of our hearers. Our faith is in a sovereign God whose message of salvation we proclaim. Therefore, we avoid methods of persuasion that are manipulative in nature and show disrespect for men and women. We regard our hearers as people created in the image of God, and ultimately they are responsible to God for their decisions and actions.



21) *Ibid.*, p. 151. Adapted from Moishe Rosen, presented at a meeting of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism in Dallas, Texas, in 1985.