

Why should freedom favor proselytizing faiths over those that don't seek converts?

Religion and the Right to Be Left Alone

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By Avatans Kumar

Vice President JD Vance caused an uproar this past fall when he expressed his wish that his wife, Usha, a practicing Hindu, would one day follow his spiritual path. Many in the billionstrong global Hindu community were outraged at his declared hope that Mrs. Vance would convert to Catholicism.

Different religions perceive proselytization differently. Religious conversions, normal in the Western world, have never held much place in nonproselytizing traditions. Christianity and Islam, the world's largest religions, both actively seek converts from other faiths through persuasion, education, outreach and sometimes coercion.

One visible result is that even today discussions of freedom of religion have a pro-proselytizing tint. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects the freedom of thought, conscience and religion—including the right to change one's religion or belief. The declaration doesn't specifically protect the right to retain one's faith.

Nonproselytizing religions face an asymmetry, and their efforts to safeguard followers from predatory proselytization are routinely labeled violations of religious freedom and human rights. That India's anticonversion laws are criticized by international rights organizations exemplifies this asymmetry and systemic misunderstanding.

From the perspective of nonproselytizing religions, people have a right to stay in their religion and not be bothered by those who wish to convert them. There is a disconnect in human-rights discourse. The right to change religion is unqualified by its nature, but the right to try to change someone's religion can't be unqualified without interfering with and violating others' religious freedom.

This disconnect is visible in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which has no Hindu commissioners. Conferences on freedom of religion routinely have inadequate representation of Hinduism. The United Nations' 2022 Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions had "minimal" representation, according to prominent Hindu leaders.

The root of this general dismissal of nonproselytizing religions is the dominance of Christianity and Islam. The former is known for promoting evangelism, as seen in Jesus' directive in Mark 16:15: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Islam emphasizes dawah, instructing Muslims to invite people to Islam. Muslims ruled large parts of India from the early 13th to the 19th century, and during this era Muslim preachers and Sufi mystics actively proselytized for Islam. The pattern of seeking converts is manifested in the missionary work of both Christianity and Islam.

As these forms of faith came down to the present day, they tended to ignore the strain of religions that are mostly nonproselytizing—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto and tribal indigenous traditions. In these nonproselytizing religions, actively seeking new converts serves no theological purpose.

Some of these faiths teach that spiritual experiences transcend sectarian boundaries and aren't limited to one faith. Key Hindu beliefs illustrate this idea: Hinduism holds that many paths access one underlying Truth. The Rig Veda, Hinduism's oldest text, concisely reflects this with the aphorism "Truth is one, but the wise call it by many names."

At the heart of proselytizing is exclusivity. There is a belief within proselytizing traditions that their faith alone has access to spiritual experiences in this life and beyond. Such exclusivism has led to violence. Over the halfmillennium following Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the Edict of Milan in 313, Christian leaders and followers

actively destroyed sites and traditions of pagan--ism as they expanded across Europe. Catherine Nixey's 2014 book, "The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World," argues that this marked a turbulent and violent transformation, giving rise to what some have described as the "savage birth" of Christian Europe.

Islam often spread in the Arab world and Indian subcontinent with the might of the sword. Several scholars have described the destruction of Hindu temples and deities in the Indian subcontinent.

Colonialism is closely linked to religious conversion, as British missionaries sought to convert Hindus. Many British Christians believed their religion was more advanced and enlightened than those of the people they ruled, motivating their missionary activities.

The result of all this history is the echo that still persists in the contemporary views of human-rights organizations, with their definitions of religious freedom as centered around the freedom to proselytize.

And thereby such major religions as Hinduism—the world's third-largest faith—are excluded from humanrights discourse, international bodies and religious-freedom monitoring organizations. This asymmetry needs to be addressed.

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