

THE SPECTRE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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The recent Papal contention that there is prohibition of religious freedom in India is an allegation to be taken seriously by the State as well as the Indian people. Addressing the Bishops of India during their *ad limina* visit to the Vatican, the Pope charged that the “free exercise of the natural right to religious freedom” is prohibited in India. A similar concern was registered in the latest report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which declared India as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

Both the Vatican and the U.S. Commission have cited the introduction of “anti-conversion” bills in some Indian States as the basis for their conclusions. To those who care to read these bills, however, it is clear that they do show a clear intent to make “the use of force or allurement or fraudulent means” unlawful in conversion activities (Tamil Nadu Ordinance No. 9 of 2002). What just-minded person would not applaud a State’s efforts to prohibit the use of such means, especially in the sphere of religion? Is it not, then, an embarrassment to those involved in religious conversion activities that the state finds it necessary to issue an ordinance specifically prohibiting these means on their behalf?

Christian Missionaries have always assumed complete freedom to evangelize and convert any non-Christian society. And history has shown that they have felt entitled to do so by any means. They honestly feel that it is not only their right, but their solemn duty to convert, not just individuals, but entire nations. Their scripture enjoins them, and the current Pope repeatedly reminds them to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:20).” This perception of religious freedom needs an objective examination inasmuch as it engenders deep hurt and attracts bitter opposition from the adherents of other religions.

In my perception there is religious freedom in any country wherein one is free to live one’s religious life without being inhibited by State legislation or being subject to organized persecutions from the people of any religious, political, socio-economic or ethnic community. One would think that all those who desire freedom of religion would find this a reasonable and accurate perception. But this freedom is not adequate for some; it does not include the freedom to evangelize and convert.

I want to be clear about what I mean by ‘evangelize and convert’. I do not mean that one should not have the freedom to “manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance,” as stipulated in Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Dec-

laration of Human Rights. This is an inalienable right, a sacred right, of all human beings that is to be cherished and protected. However, one who considers oneself subject to a religious mandate to convert people of other religions to one's own has a world-view that does not permit religious freedom. His/her inner religious landscape does not have any legitimate place for the practice of religions other than his/her own. Thus, as a person, one does not have the inner space to grant freedom to people to pursue other religions. It is not possible, either religiously or psychologically.

When the practice of one's religion involves evangelizing in order to bring outsiders into one's fold of believers, one is bound to become blind to a certain truth. One cannot, under these circumstances, recognize that one is intruding into the sanctity of the inner religious space of others. The blindness is evident when, in the same address, one can make a passionate appeal for evangelization, and also, for a democracy to support it that has "respect for religious freedom, for this is the right which touches on the individual's most private and sovereign interior freedom" (Address of Pope John Paul II to the New Ambassador of India, 13 December 2002 cited in address to Bishops of India, May 2003). While recognizing an individual's religious freedom as "most private and sovereign," there is, at the same time, an exhortation to invade this private, sacred space. In other words, to trample upon the very freedom one allegedly wishes to preserve. The contradiction reveals obtuseness in the extreme, a double standard, or a form of religious arrogance that is commonly known as fundamentalism.

I have no intention of disparaging any religion here, but rather, to be very clear about certain realities. Integral to a converting religion is conversion. And a commitment to conversion involves certain unavoidable assumptions. Even when there is no visible attempt to evangelize and convert at a given time and place, the lull is not due to any newly discovered tolerance towards other religions. The underlying assumptions and commitment do not allow for that. The lull is only a strategic wait, biding time for the moment when there is the desired "religious freedom".

Ethnic religions the world over do not now, nor have they ever evangelized. Why? In the minds of the people given to these traditions there is total absence of religious intolerance. The tenets and mores of those traditions have allowed the people who hold them to naturally grant total freedom to others to practice their religion. It is never an issue. But this unquestioned granting of religious freedom has given the initial thumb-space for the aggressive traditions to evangelize, convert and erase indigenous religions and their cultures from many countries, and even some continents. This is a crucial fact that, if overlooked,

can, and has distorted the perception of the situation. It is so important to understand that today, an objection to conversion from any indigenous religious leadership is an urgently necessary and long-overdue *assertion*, not a violation, of human rights. In all fairness, such an objection could not be further from being a violation of human rights, much less religious fundamentalism.

I know that a Hindu is free from any malice toward any form of religious practice. I also know that there is no religious mandate in the Hindu Dharma to bring other religionists to the Hindu fold. Therefore, a Hindu is fundamentally accommodative in terms of religious pursuits. And it is common knowledge that, because of this, India has been the historical refuge of the religiously persecuted and disenfranchised. Yet, if a Hindu wants his or her religious privacy respected and not intruded upon, immediately the spectre of “religious freedom” is raised at all possible levels of legal as well as public forums. This extends well beyond our domestic borders and has far-reaching consequences for our quality of life. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that its Government utilize various tools, such as economic sanctions, to exert pressure on Countries of Particular Concern (CPC), like India, in order to ensure adequate “religious freedom” for their evangelism and conversion programmes. A deeper analysis of the facts reveals that such measures are clearly unjust.

If Pope John Paul II could heed his own words in his recent address to the Bishops of India on their *ad limina* visit to the Vatican, the interests of peaceful coexistence of religions, and of people of good will everywhere would be well served. On that occasion, the Pontiff said to the Bishops of India, “To love the least among us *without expecting anything in return* is truly to love Christ.” In the current climate this appears to be a tall order for evangelizing religions. Hindus in India, on the other hand, have been accommodating religions of all stripes with extraordinary grace for centuries, and if allowed, will continue to do so for centuries to come. This in no way, however, should be construed as a license for abuses such as those prohibited in the conversion ordinances. Nor could a protest against such abuses be construed, by decent people anywhere, as a violation of any kind of human right.

Om Tat Sat

Compiled by Swamini Agamananda.

This is the sixth of nine articles based on Pujya Swamiji’s talks on the said subject matter.