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Chapter 2

Conflicts over Proselytism: An Overview and Comparative Perspective

Jean-François Mayer

"Missionaries are missionaries!" Such was the instant reaction of an Indian police official, speaking of missionary activities in his area, and whom I had asked to tell more precisely *which* missionaries he had in mind. Similar reactions can be observed in many places around the world. Whether it be Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, or secularists, there are people of all persuasions who harbour suspicions about missionaries.

Conflicts over proselytism are not just an issue for non-Western countries. They are, in effect, a widespread phenomenon, the only difference being that people react in the name of their various ideologies or beliefs. In a number of Western countries, scholars have documented and analyzed over the past three decades a number of "cult" controversies. Those controversies—justified or not—represent reactions against missionary activities associated with non-conventional groups. Cults do not typically come under fire just because they propagate bizarre ideas, but because they *convert* people; parents worry about their sons and daughters choosing new lifestyles and orientations. The proselytizing activities and methods of cults are considered to be dishonest and subversive. They are often accused of making individuals into obedient zombies through mind control.

Another conflict over proselytism in the Western world has been the Islamic scarf controversy in France. Before the country decided to completely ban religious emblems, such as Islamic scarves and Sikh turbans, in French schools in 2004 (not in universities, however), there had been an initial decision to ban the scarf (in 1989) in cases where wearing it would "constitute an act of

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pressure, provocation, proselytism or propaganda."[1] It proved, however, quite difficult for school directors to assess what the intent was in each case, hence the law banning the headscarf entirely was instituted. When introducing to the French Parliament the bill on implementing the principles of secularity in state schools on 3 February 2004, French Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, commented:

> Because the State is the protector of the freedom of conscience, it has a duty to intervene when **proselytism**, a withdrawal into a community, or a refusal to recognize the equality of the sexes threaten that fundamental liberty at the heart of our Republican pact. ...
>
> School is a place of Republican neutrality and must remain so because it is above all else the place where minds are formed, where knowledge is passed on and where children learn to live as citizens—all concepts incompatible with **proselytism**.[2]

Thus proselytism is problematic in the eyes of secularists, as well as believers, who feel threatened by missions. There are those who see proselytism as a threat. Years ago, Martin Marty adequately summarized the issues at stake:

> When people proselytize, they represent not just an impulse or an emotion but a world. Through their agency, one world advances and encroaches upon another. An embodiment of one world invites or urges others to become part of it, to see things in a new way, to be uprooted from old communities and contexts and to find new ones. (Marty 1988, 155)

My original interest in this question of proselytism was awakened by the research which I have been conducting on new religious movements since the 1980s. I could observe at that time methods used by movements to recruit new members, but also concerns expressed by relatives, representatives of mainline religions and officials. It was remarkable to see the variety of conversion types, ranging from the "Paul on the road to Damascus model" which is expressed in the following pattern: I entered the room, I saw the guru, and I knew immediately I had to follow him, to a trial and error model where people would convert after a long time of experimentation and trials. This made me aware of the reality of a religious market, but also of the need for smaller religious movements to proselytize not only in order to grow, but also just to survive, due to turnover. As an historian, I occasionally did research on groups across several decades, and it became clear that persistent missionary efforts sometimes yielded only modest results such as merely keeping a group from declining in numbers, despite the many hours spent each week disseminating its message.

I also paid attention early on to conversions and missionary activities in

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the context of mainline religions. In the 1980s, I participated in a French project, initiated by the Centre de Recherche et d'Etude sur la Diffusion et l'Inculturation du Christianisme (CREDIC), consisting of interviews with returned missionaries (mostly Roman Catholic and Reformed ministers). Listening to people who had sometimes spent twenty years or more in mission fields, it was fascinating to hear them reflecting on their perceptions of missionary work in retrospect: most of them felt that they had gone abroad in the hope of changing people, but had come back quite changed themselves by their experiences.

During the 1990s, I focused increasingly on religious factors in international developments, which led to the launching of my bilingual (French-English) website Religioscope—www.religion.info—in January 2002. During travels in various parts of the world, or through material collected on areas which I have not been able to visit myself, I have encountered again and again hotly debated issues pertaining to missionary activities. In 1999, in South India, I even had the unexpected experience of being mistaken for a missionary by a group of Hindu activists who surrounded me and threatened me: "We don't like missionaries here!" It took a long discussion to calm them down. Such events taught me further about the resentment which missionary activities can generate.

Whatever our personal beliefs, as scholars we are faced with this challenge: we need to understand and analyze in a dispassionate way the issue of proselytism. We must produce case studies and reconstruct carefully the details of specific situations and encounters. But we also need to attempt to see if common—or at least frequent—patterns emerge when we look at cases in range of places, religious environments, and political contexts. Based upon observations by other scholars, as well as myself, in several parts of the world, this is what I will attempt to do here. I will present my observations in the form of six theses, each of which will be briefly explicated and discussed.

1. **Conflicts over missionary activities are likely to increase, due to the current forces of globalization. In the long term, however, missionary activities might also lead to an increased acceptance of pluralism.**

In September 2003, during a walk with a group of young Muslims in mountains not very far from Dushanbe, Tajikistan, we entered a camp formerly used by Communist Youth, and now made available for rental to any organization willing to pay for it. The camp was used at that time during an entire month by about a hundred local evangelicals, being trained by Korean missionaries. Interestingly, one of the Muslims walking with me was a Turkish follower of Fetullah Gülen—and the *Fetullahci* have been described by some experts, such as Bayram Balci (see Chapter 15, this volume), as a missionary

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Muslim movement in Central Asia (even if followers of Fetullah Gülen do not see themselves in such a light).

In San Cristobal de las Casas, in Chiapas, Mexico, two hundred Mexicans, many of them formerly Protestant, who had been expelled from their homes by local Catholics, converted to Islam and formed a small commune of their own. They were converted by Spanish missionaries of the Murabitun movement, an Islamic group founded in the 1970s by a Scotsman (Garvin 2005).

It is remarkable that in the same place in Central Asia, one can find Muslim and Christian missionaries, Tajiks, Russians, Turks and Koreans competing. Similarly, in Chiapas, where indigenous practices are common, Roman Catholicism and various Protestant organizations already compete with one another (beside Zapatista insurgents), alongside Muslim missionaries. This is increasingly bound to become the case. Travelling has become easy, missionaries are no longer supposed to leave their home country for life or many years, instead they are able just to fly somewhere for the duration of a seminar, before reporting back to headquarters. There have actually been some recent discussions among US evangelicals on the implications and consequences of sending short-term missionaries. This is a trend that is likely to increase with improved travel.

The impact of the Internet should also be kept in mind: beliefs can spread even without the physical presence of a missionary. In New Orleans, a colleague, Cathy Wessinger, took me to a local Voodoo priestess, who was proud to tell me she had followers in Russia who had found her on the Web!

The availability of many messages and easy access to a variety of groups means that the 21st century could be an age of unprecedented proselytism. This will lead to conflicts and tensions. In the long term, however, consequences cannot be foreseen with certainty. It might also lead to an increasing acceptance of pluralism, once the fact of competing religions in a worldwide religious market becomes accepted (at least in some parts of the world).

Yet we can still expect many Muslims to uphold the doctrine according to which a Muslim should not be allowed to leave the tradition, and any attempt to do so should be punishable by death. Many Russian Orthodox Christians will continue to resent the missionary activities of other Christians in what they consider the "canonical territory" of the Russian Orthodox Church (see Kazmina, Chapter 14, this volume). But we would be well served to beware of approaches which consider the attitudes of believers to be fixed forever—since change is a permanent feature of our human existence. A recent survey conducted on Muslims in Switzerland on behalf of the Swiss weekly *L'Hebdo* (9 December 2004) revealed that 54.6% of Muslims living in Switzerland considered it "perfectly acceptable" for a Muslim to leave

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Islam in order to join another religion. Similarly, a recent book authored by two Muslims comes to the conclusion that, from the most reliable religious sources, there are several possible interpretations in Islam regarding apostates, including the view that one should have the freedom to choose one's own religion. This approach, the authors claim, would be appropriate for a multi-religious and multicultural world, while punishment for apostasy by death is seen as untenable in the modern period (Saeed *et al.* 2004).

Forecasts should however remain cautious: we do not yet know which new groups might begin to proselytize, and which impact and consequences such activities might have in the future.

2. Proselytism can reinforce images of a clash of civilizations.

Reactions against Christian proselytizing activities in Iraq have illustrated this phenomenon. While proselytism is obviously only part of a wider picture, it has been perceived as one more piece of evidence of a crusade against Islam. It has also made local Christians—with a history in those areas—nervous about the image it projects to their Muslim neighbors.

Swiss journalist Christoph Zürcher followed a caravan of Overland Missions in Zambia and published an article in the newspaper *NZZ am Sonntag* (20 June 2004) describing what he saw: evangelists working with military know-how (the leader of the Overland Missions team had worked in Angola with the Unita guerilla group) and believing themselves to be on the frontline of the war of civilizations. In all countries, where Overland Missions is active, missionaries are provided with maps dividing villages to be visited into three categories: "unreached," "neglected" and "in danger." The first group consists of those people who have never been visited by missionaries before, the second group includes those who had converted, but may have lost touch with Christianity in the meantime. The third category—"in danger"—applies to places where Islam has already reached.

One should not underestimate the impact of victorious reports and missionary plans written in the style of a planned military offensive and sent back to headquarters by enthusiastic missionaries anxious to improve fundraising! Needless to say, in the age of the Internet, they are not only read by intended recipients, but also used as evidence of a conspiracy by members of targeted religious groups.

One should also remember that reactions to missionary activities have for a long time contributed to the emergence of revivalist and militant movements in a variety of cultural contexts. One of the two original goals of the Muslim Brotherhood, when it was founded in Egypt in 1928, was to counteract Christian missionary propaganda. Its first congress, in 1933, was devoted to this topic. There are also indications that the Brotherhood originally devel-

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oped in areas where missionary activities happened to be strong (Ternisien 2005, 30–33).

In areas of Africa, and possibly other places around the world as well, it is obvious that Christians and Muslims will increasingly compete over the conversion of souls. According to German scholar Frieder Ludwig, Tanzania would be one instance of a country where Christian activism (following Pentecostal impetus) and Islamic revivalism seem to be increasingly clashing (Ludwig 1996). Interestingly, on both sides, the role of outside factors and groups is not insignificant, since, according to Ludwig, Christian-Muslim coexistence had long been peaceful in Tanzania.

Of course, it would be an exaggeration to claim that proselytism has such an impact everywhere, or that missionary work is the only root of such religious developments. It should always be considered in a specific context. However, since civilizations tend to be associated with beliefs, it is quite understandable that propagation of other beliefs may exacerbate clashes, or be used as the basis for an argument.

3. **Proselytism is not just seen as a way of spreading religious ideas: it is often perceived as an attempt to extend ideological influence and political dominance.**

On a well-known Indian website for political analysis, a Hindu intellectual based in America (and a nuclear physicist by training), Moorthy Muthuswamy, published the following remarks:

> For any nation that wants to project its power and achieve prosperity, it makes sense to have its dominant ideology be a dominant one also in countries around the world. It creates a sense of commonality and help build relationships that are beneficial. In the past, even Christian dominated, officially "democratic and secular" nations have given official backing to spreading of Christian ideology around the world. Nowadays, unofficial and indirect backing is the norm. In addition these countries have demanded and obtained, "religious freedom" in less developed countries such as India, so that their missionaries can use modern marketing tools and wealth to convert the local population to their ideology. The fact that the United States' "Religious Freedom Commission" [sic] has until recently, downplayed religious abuses by Saudi Arabia (its ally) and highlighted China's (a competitor) protection of its population from proselytizers, including ones from America, should give away the strategic nature of the Commission reports. The Chinese leadership has clearly understood this strategic game and has worked successfully to shield its populations from either Christian or Muslim missionaries. (Muthuswamy 2004)

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Roman Catholic clergy, leftist militants, and activists for indigenous rights have frequently expressed the same views regarding evangelicals in South America. They have been seen as agents of US imperialism, and as conduits of foreign influence and money. "Fundamentalist missionaries" in South America have been blamed for "infringing upon national sovereignty;" they have sometimes been accused of being "CIA agents" in religious garb (Gros 1992). According to Frigerio's analysis of Argentinian cult controversies (which included evangelicals/Pentecostals) from 1985–1992, a major issue during the first period was that cults were "groups financed from abroad" (Frigerio 1993). Additionally, journalist Alfredo Silletta warned that "[c]ults are invading Argentina." Such a militant vocabulary was not just used for sensationalist purposes. Silletta was convinced that confrontation "is not only a military one, but an ideological one too," and implicated cults (including evangelicals) as being a part of a US strategy to make people lose interest in the fight for social justice (Silletta 1991, 151). Such theories do not only find an audience in Latin America—on the front page of the May 2001 issue of the French monthly *Le Monde diplomatique*, one could read an article titled: "Cults: Trojan horse of the United States in Europe." Where proselytism is seen as a strategic threat, efforts by superpowers such as the United States to promote international religious freedom may in some cases confirm suspicions. In Vietnam, the government reacts harshly against the evangelical movement among Hmong tribals, because it is afraid that the United States, after being unable to defeat the Vietnamese militarily, is now attempting to reach the same goal through alternative, somewhat more peaceful ways. It is also afraid that religion will encourage separatist aspirations (Lewis 2002, 104–05). In a completely different ideological context, identical fears are expressed by Hindu activists in areas such as North-East India: Christians there are often accused of promoting separatism. To some extent, there may indeed be a relation between separatist trends and religious changes. But it is usually a consequence of a variety of factors, and not merely the turning to new beliefs.

A common concern about proselytism as a tool for subverting a society can even unite different religions. In the former Soviet Union, "traditional religions" often join in a common cause against competitors in a religious market they would prefer to keep unchanged. On 23 December 1997, members of a joint commission of the Moscow Patriarchate and of the Islamic Republic of Iran signed a joint declaration which, besides emphasizing "the closeness of their understanding of some aspects of the relations between religion, state and society," stated:

> The Commission condemned proselytism, promotion of religion by means of violence, pressure, threatening and dishonesty which ruin inter-religious peace and contradict human freedom. Both sides rejected use of pseudo-

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> missionary activities in service of political, economic and cultural domination.[2]

Clearly, fears about proselytism as an ideological strategy also relate to concerns about its impact on national interests.

4. **Where there are conflicts over proselytism, missionary activities are often understood or presented as a threat not so much to religion as to national interests.**

When I met Dr. Mete Gündogan, one of the leaders of the Saadet Party (i.e. the smaller party which continues to follow the line of veteran Islamic Turkish politican Erbakan in the Milli Görüs tradition), at the headquarters of the Party in Ankara, in September 2004, he was open about his views regarding missionaries:

> I thought you would be bewildered why we are against missionaries in this country. We are against missionaries because missionaries are used by modern imperialists for their capital or industrial exploitation. So nobody can come to this country as an agent of any imperialistic or capitalistic ideas. This is considered as double agenda. All over the world, nobody likes people who have double agenda [sic]. So missionaries are seen in this country as the people who have double agenda [sic]. Practicing their religious beliefs is quite welcome and quite normal.
>
> Islam is a strong religion in this land or this region.... We do not hold inside antagonism against Christianity, we are not antagonists. But if a bunch of people comes to us as something on behalf of some other circles, this is not liked. Missionaries in Turkey are not a threat to our religion. Missionaries in Turkey are a threat to the unity of the Turkish Republic and to Turkish Republic's industrial and economic sovereignties, because they have a double agenda.[3]

One can hear similar statements from other countries in the Muslim world, as well as from Hindus. Muslim and Christian agencies present "a source of grave threat to our national security and integrity," writes Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ideologue H.V. Seshadri (1998, 58). Another Hindutva thinker, Sita Ram Goel, situates it into a wider historical context:

> Hindu society has to understand very clearly that what it is faced with in the form of Christianity and Islam is not religions but imperialist ideologies whose appetite has been whetted by conquest of a large part of the world.... There is little chance that Hindu society will ever be able to contain Christianity and Islam if Hindus continue to regard these imperialist ideologies as religions. (Goel 1987, 75)

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"Ban proselytisation and avert disintegration" warned a pamphlet published by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) (Manian n.d.). The question asked to people converting is: "Where do you belong? Whom do you side with?" As Bhatt has observed, the VHP and RSS attitudes toward Christians are based on "a narrative of a global Christian conspiracy," attempting to promote an "alien" religion (Bhatt 2001, 198–99). Hindu activists claim that India (Bharat) is holy land, but Christians and Muslims have their holy land elsewhere, and for this reason hold dual loyalties, unable to relate fully to Bharat as a holy land. A few years ago, the leader of the RSS suggested there should be an Indian "national church," immune from foreign interferences, quoting China as an example of the course which should be followed—an unusual positive reference to India's big neighbour from the mouth of an Indian nationalist!

As it is often the case in such controversies, critics of proselytism indeed raise some issues which are not unsubstantiated, even if in reality they are more complex. It may be that proselytism and subsequent conversions sometimes lead to an estrangement, and it cannot be denied that they have an impact on cultures, positive or not—one remembers accusations of "ethnocide" launched by some anthropologists. Antony Copley has remarked that, for a Hindu in South India in the mid-19th century, conversion would imply converting "both to Christianity and to western culture" (Copley 1999, 180). However, this is not a general rule, more often conversions lead to a rearrangement of identities and affiliations, which by definition are multidimensional. When speaking with converts to a variety of religious paths, one constantly comes across such cases: religious identity forms one layer among others.

It is also not wrong that conversion can have a political impact. In Tripura, North-East India, where Christian missions were only allowed from 1938 onwards, and the development of Christianity has been a relatively recent phenomenon, clearly Christianity has helped disseminate liberal ideas among the younger generation. According to Debbarma, Christianity has also been instrumental in arousing a sense of national consciousness among the indigenous (tribal) population, which forms today a minority in Tripura (Debbarma 1996, 102). Conversion not unfrequently accompanies social mobility and access to education, often through mission schools. Undoubtedly, there will be political consequences, and an impact on social structures as well.

Reducing conflicts over proselytism to hostile encounters between religions offers an overly reductionist perspective. Some of the advocates of "religious nationalism" are not actually strong believers. Shiv Sena's charismatic leader, Bal Thackeray, became an agnostic after his pious wife passed away because she had forgotten to take a medicine with her and God didn't remind her.

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This does not prevent him from continuing to describe himself as Hindu: "My Hinduism is nationalism. ... I am proud of being a Hindu" (*India Today*, 15 December 1995).

Regarding the statements which have been quoted, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of people claiming to see missionaries as a threat to national security. However, it may also be in part a rationalization of a clash of beliefs in a modern context in which people are aware that it is not "politically correct" to criticize change of religion in itself. There is certainly a combination of both dimensions.

5. **Groups and people critical of proselytism tend to distinguish the issue from religious freedom, which they usually profess to accept in principle.**

Human rights can sometimes turn into an argument *against* proselytism. Article 13 of the Greek Constitution of 1975 expressly forbids proselytism, but the same article states also that any "known religion" can be freely practiced. Greek laws do not forbid conversions—otherwise Greece could not be a member of the European Union, but undue influence in attempting to convince a person to change his or her religion. Interestingly, the European Court of Human Rights has never condemned the constitutional principle banning proselytism in itself, although some judges have been of the opinion that it represents a limitation of religious freedom *de facto* (Öktem 2002).

In a book published on human rights in Islamic law, a Muslim expert from the United Arab Emirates—holding a Ph.D in International Law of Human Rights from Exeter University—has attempted to explain that not allowing a Muslim to change his religion is in fact compatible with international principles regarding religious freedom:

> since it does not interfere with the rights of non-Muslims to freedom of religion or belief, it may be considered as a sort of internal domestic affair which only concerns Muslims. Namely, all religions, moral and legal systems stipulate certain conditions which are applicable only to their adherents or to people under their jurisdictions. (Al-Marzouqi 2001, 437–38)

It is unlikely that this will sound convincing to many advocates of religious freedom, but it demonstrates how many people feel regarding the pressing need for restrictions on proselytism into some form of agreement with widely acknowledged international principles. Today, conflicts involving proselytism rarely deny the basic principle of religious freedom. Instead, reactions against missionary activities attempt to show that conversions have been performed in an unacceptable, unethical way, and that people have been pressured or lured through promises of material gain. In Bangladesh, Christian missions

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are accused by some people of "seriously disturbing communal harmony" and of "exploiting both the ignorance and poverty of the people" (Islam n.d.). It would be fairly simple to gather dozens of similar quotes from a variety of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian sources.

Some thinkers have argued that proselytism should be condemned from the perspective of human rights. Such were the remarks of a Hindu living in the United States at a conference on "Human Rights and Religion" at Cornell University in November 2000:

> The following phrases are commonly used by proselytizers in describing their non-Christian target prospects: "sinners," "condemned," "damned," "heathen," "pagan," etc. If it were not done under the cover of religion, would this not have been declared as hate speech? Does such speech, even if disguised, generate communal tensions? Is this responsible for negative episodes in India between Hindus and Christians who coexisted peacefully for centuries before the arrival of the proselytizers? ... Does it violate the UN Human Rights provision that guarantees "dignity" to all people as a basic human right? (Malhotra 2001)

Italian scholar Silvio Ferrari has accurately remarked that proselytism is coming increasingly under attack: it is seen more and more as an infringement upon rights to private life and religious identity. While there was an earlier a debate on "illegitimate" proselytism, it is now proselytism per se which is seen as questionable, even by legal experts. Ferrari comes to the conclusion that only self-limitation by proselytizing groups and stronger sensitivity toward targets of missionary activities can prevent conflicts over proselytism, otherwise states might increasingly intervene for the sake of peace within societies (Ferrari 2000).

The conflicts generated over proselytizing activities should be considered in this new context, where freedom to proselytize and freedom to worship are no longer necessarily seen as complementary. In a long article on issues of proselytism, Natan Lerner emphasizes the need to protect "the right to convert and the right to proselytize," but also observes that these are "not absolute rights." He suggests one limitation related to the (controversial) emergence of group rights in addition to individual rights:

> One of the limits of the right to proselytism is the protection of communal or collective identities. Minority rights are relevant to this concept. The international community has been reluctant to abandon the individualistic approach followed since the establishment of the United Nations. A change in this approach seems necessary since group rights deserve to be protected. (Lerner 1998, 559)

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Amidst a changing geo-political environment, conflicts over proselytism are becoming a more complex issue with the debate moving toward a focus on competing rights. At least in words, opponents of proselytism avoid being seen as enemies of religious freedom, but as helpers of victims. The website www.christianaggression.org emphasizes: "This website holds the Christian faith in high regard and is in no way anti-Christian. Rather this website is opposed to the aggression practiced under the name of Christianity."[4]

6. **Conflicts over proselytism foster change and encourage the creation of new strategies and organizations among religious groups targeted by missionaries.**

A look at the history of neo-Hinduism[5] shows how its emergence and development were closely connected with issues raised by the challenge of Christian and—sometimes—Muslim missions. Observers have interpreted the appearance of groups with new organizational features (and some level of missionary impetus) within Hinduism as "counter-missions." Indeed, a number of such groups adopted structures mimetic of their (Christian) competitors, beginning with the use of the label "mission" (from the already old Ramakrishna Mission to more recent groups such as Mata Amritanandamayi Mission).

Missionary activities have also contributed to the emergence of activist organizations intended to counter the actions of particular missionaries, and to promote the interest of the former's religious groups. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist revival cannot be separated from reactions against missionary activities. A victorious debate by a well-known monk with a Methodist missionary in 1873 "symbolized the beginning of the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka" (Little 1994, 18). The more recent trends of Buddhist activism stemmed from reactions in the 1950s against the prominent positions occupied by Christians in economic and political spheres, as well as the role of Christian schools (Tambiah 1993, 593–95). A key issue which led to the founding of the VHP in 1964 was the International Eucharistic Congress in Bombay that same year, with the announcement that it would be marked by the conversion to Christianity of 250 Hindus. This convinced a number of Hindus that the only appropriate line of defence would be the creation of a pan-Hindu, "ecclesiastical" organization, assembling on the same platform all sections of Hinduism. (Jaffrelot 1994, 187–88).

One of the most significant consequences is that reacting to proselytism has led some non-proselytizing religions to proselytize. An interesting exemple is provided by "reconversions" to Hinduism in India. The practice of *shuddhi* (Ghai 1990)—which existed already as a process of purification—was developed as a reaction both to Muslim and to Christian conversions. Originally,

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it was used by the Arya Samaj for reconverting individuals—including individuals who were not born Hindus, but whose ancestors had been Hindus (Jordens 1991). At first, it was not widely accepted. But the Muslim Moplah insurgency on the Malabar Coast in 1921, during which many Hindus had forcefully been converted to Islam, made *shuddhi* a convenient and more widely accepted tool in order to reintegrate those people into the Hindu fold. Today, one can read regularly in Indian media reports regarding reconversions of groups (usually in rural areas). However, the acceptance of *shuddhi* has also paved the road for receiving into Hinduism people without any Hindu lineage, e.g. Westerners. In this way, *shuddhi*—originally a defensive strategy against conversions—has played a role in universalizing Hinduism.

Even more striking—and much remains to be studied here—is the way in which reactions to proselytism have led tribal religious groups to organize and restructure, in order to counter the threat of proselytism. Such groups are reported to exist today in six of the seven states of North-East India, the oldest one being the Seng Khasi, founded in Meghalya in 1899. Incidentally, this organization is also one of the founding members of the Indian chapter of the Unitarian-inspired International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF). Referring to such attempts to organize traditional religions, Samir Kumar Das remarks that, "[f]or them, it is like founding a new religion seen as a cementing force in the face of a Christian or Hindu onslaught" (Kumar Das 2004, 249). Indeed, Hindu missions also bring changes to traditional religions, which can lead to tensions, although there are also cases of cooperation between revivalist organizations of tribal religions and Hindu activists.

One of the most extraordinary attempts to coordinate resistance to proselytism has been provided by a group of people belonging to the RSS, who have launched a World Council of Elders of Ancient Traditions and Cultures. They organized in Mumbai in February 2003 the First International Conference and Gathering of the Elders. Participants adopted the Mumbai Manifesto, which states:

> We have inherited from our ancestors rites and rituals to invoke Divinity, by different names and different forms. ... We declare that we will work together towards ... [h]ighlighting the pains and trauma of religious conversions made on the presumption that others' traditions, cultures or religions are inferior, and thus create an awareness to stop any religious conversions.[6]

According to a report circulated by a Western Neo-Pagan who attended, half of the participants were of non-Indian origin, including African-American women representing the Yoruba tradition, Native Americans, a Zoroastrian, two Orthodox Jewish rabbis (since they do not proselytize), a Unitarian Universalist, and two leaders of the Pagan Lithuanian organization Romuva.

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The report stated that

> the Zulu tradition was represented by two white South African men and two white American nurses currently staying in South Africa. We also had a real black Zulu but he practises Hinduism and was preparing to visit Sai Baba after the Council.[7]

This is revealing of the globalized context within which conflicts over proselytism may take place today.

Conclusion

The various situations presented in the previous pages illustrate how conflicts over proselytism are multifaceted, and not only a matter of conflicting religious beliefs. There are:

1) *Religious* dimensions: religious monopolies or a religious balance between various groups are put into question by newly introduced religious beliefs or revivalist movements within already existing traditions. Such developments lead established religious bodies to react in the name of religion, heritage, and nationalism or ethnicity.

2) *Political* dimensions: the introduction of new beliefs can be perceived as a threat to national integrity or as a tool in the hands of foreign powers for spreading their influence. Those feelings can also be shared by people who are not believers or adherents.

3) *Social* dimensions: the diffusion of alternative beliefs is seen as destructive to the heritage of a group, its way of life, or even its survival. This may lead not only to reactions, but also to innovations within a religious tradition, as it adjusts itself to new challenges. It may even absorb some of the ideas or strategies of the invading groups in the process.

Researching conflicts involving proselytism requires an historical perspective: no-one could properly analyze the current controversies in India without taking a look first at nineteenth-century debates, which have been influencing up to now the perception of missionary activities. Furthermore, one should also be aware of changing global contexts.

There are undoubtedly commonalities between reactions against proselytism in various cultures: for example, "cults" are the Trojan horse of the United States in Europe, according to some French observers. Islam and Christianity are a means of fulfilling imperialist ambitions in India, Christian missions are the equivalent of Western imperialism in the Middle East, etc. A number of quotations from primary sources have been provided here as they highlight the similarities apparent between various contexts. This does not lessen the significance of particular local factors. For instance, a colonial past seems

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to have exacerbated conflicts surrounding the issue of proselytism in several cases, since foreign religions may then be seen as components of a colonialist legacy. Religious nationalist groups, claiming that decolonization is an unfinished business and that minds remain enslaved by foreign ideologies, quite often see missionary activities as part of the wider problem.

A comparative perspective, such as the one adopted here, helps to understand that reactions against proselytism represent a more widespread phenomenon. Far from disappearing, they may take new forms. Besides the defensive postures of religious activists within various traditions, liberals are also suspicious of proselytism, which is hardly compatible with relativism. Proselytism also comes under attack from people who associate proselytizers with people infringing upon individual freedom.

With or without proselytism, a dynamic multireligious environment means that it cannot be taken for granted that everyone will stay within their respective traditions. Intermarriage is often perceived as a serious threat as proselytism (or even more so). Instead of fighting a losing battle, there are representatives of less missionary-minded traditions who see it as a good argument for converting prospective spouses to one's own religious tradition. An editorial in *Hinduism Today* (July-September 2005) commented: "If there is no channel for the non-Hindu partner to become a Hindu, the likelihood increases that the Hindu will convert to the spouse's religion or fall away from religion altogether." Demographic challenges—including consequences of intermarriages—have led some groups in modern Judaism to advocate a return to the proselytism which existed in ancient times (Rosenbloom 1978, 123–37). It is not only proselytism which has led to such reactions, but the experience of a climate favourable to individual religious choices. Even non-missionary religions may become more open to potential converts, if not actively seeking them.

Few religions, however, will be eager to adopt direct proselytizing strategies. Proselytism tends to be associated today with an alleged dark side of missionary work—even when missions in themselves are not considered as undesirable. "Sharing the Good News is not a hate crime", protested *Christianity Today* in its February 2003 issue. Maybe, but religious groups with a missionary tradition (mostly Christians) have felt the need to distinguish between (bad) proselytism and (legimate) sharing of the message. We have seen that proselytism has also become questioned by legal experts. Secular questioning of proselytism will continue, for a variety of reasons. For example *Frontline*, a respected, leftist Indian news magazine, also very critical of Hindu nationalism, declares, "U.S. evangelicalism does not represent Christianity but does represent the Bush administration's agenda for global hegemony" (25 February 2005).

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However so designated, proselytizing looks set to continue, although it will likely become more diversified. The logic of the religious market implies the freedom to convince people to change their minds and choose new options; moreover, missionary religions have tools and access that they have never enjoyed before in world history. But proselytizers of any stripe will be increasingly asked to be accountable, and field criticism issued from various corners. Proselytism may not be advocated as such to avoid confrontation however, since proselytism and conflict seem to have become almost synonymous in our globalizing, increasingly interconnected, world.

Notes

1. Quoted from an English translation published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and available online: http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/actu/bulletin.gb.asp?liste=20040216.gb.html [cited 27 August 2005]. For the French version, see http://www.conseil-etat.fr/ce/missio/index_mi_cg03_01.shtml
2. See note 1, above.
3. *Communique* <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne231273.htm> [cited 27 August 2005].
4. Interview with Dr. Mete Gündogan, Saadet Party, Ankara, 8 September 2004.
5. Cited 27 August 2005.
6. "Neo-Hinduism" describes reform as well as modern movements within Hinduism, appearing since the 19th century and frequently including new organizational structures. Neo-Hindu groups often show nationalist, universalizing and missionary impulses.
7. In order to dispel any possible misunderstanding, it may be useful to mention that my name was added to the list of signatories without my knowledge or permission (as representative of the... "multicultural" tradition!), although I had not attended. I had planned to attend and had clearly stated that it would be as an academic observer—but I was finally unable to be present.
8. Frederic Lamond, "India Offers Pagan Leadership", privately circulated report, 2003.

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