

The Editor's Page

Entangled in Conversion

Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti, "Truth is one but the sages call it by many names." It's one of the most familiar of the great insights that have emerged from Indian tradition to enrich interreligious understanding, inform dialogue, and encourage inclusive and even pluralist approaches to relations among religions and cultures. Current Indian realities, however, make it increasingly clear that interreligious matters can no longer be so simply sketched against the complex backdrop of the early 21st century.

In India, as seems to be the case everywhere these days, relations between the major religions are often strained. Recently, however, the issue of religious conversion has come sharply to the fore. In particular (although one could point to other divides), a Hindu-Christian tension has been deepening for a number of years. Indeed, the resulting situation has even produced a number of incidents of violence between the two communities.

Ingredients of the mix include – from the Christian side – aggressive forms of evangelism and controversial papal pronouncements, and – from the Hindu side – a resurgent nationalism (Hindutva). There have also been mutual charges of disinformation and the inevitable political framing of the problem.

Hindu spokespersons have identified a number of concerns, among them the persistent charge that Christian groups use coercive tactics to win Indian converts. Medical care, schooling, and other forms of aid are, in this view, offered on condition of conversion to Christianity.

Many Hindus are deeply concerned with what they perceive as an aggressive and ultimately non-dialogical campaign for conversions, carried on, they argue, by many Christian groups including the Roman Catholic Church in India. Significantly, however, many Roman Catholics and other mainline Christians insist that their own congregations have been eroded by coercive, aid-based approaches employed by some evangelical Christian groups.

In several Indian states and at the national level, anti-conversion measures have been introduced. In 2002, the state of Tamil Nadu outlawed religious conversions "by force, allurements or fraudulent means." Supporters of the decree point to its careful wording and insist it does not restrict religious freedom in any way. Critics, particularly from Indian opposition parties, minority groups, and Christian organizations, express concerns about the implications of the law for India's secular fabric and for the free exercise of religion.

And the tension continues to build.

In September 2000, over 1,000 religious leaders and scholars convened in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations. The occasion was the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. The gathering saw ample evidence of mounting antagonism between the parties to the dispute, but it also produced a small opening to constructive engagement on the issue of conversion.

A group of Hindu and Christian religious leaders was informally convened at the Summit and invited to draft a statement of shared principles. That working document (see below) has been circulated in India and has proven a useful tool for continuing dialogue. One of the signers of the Millennium Summit statement, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, is the author of the first article.

In this issue of *Interreligious Insight*, we present "Perspectives: Hinduism and Christianity," a special selection of four articles opening our lead section, "Creative Encounters." The Editors hope that these thoughtful and passionate essays, each with a dramatically different point of view, will make it clear that a significant deepening of dialogue is urgently needed in the present situation. For, as a phrase quite familiar to all Indians has it, *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, "the whole world is one family."

Alan Race, Seshagiri Rao, Jim Kenney

At the UN: An Informal Working Understanding

Freedom from Coercion in Religion

1. We agree that the free and generous preaching of the Christian Gospel is welcome in India.
2. We condemn the use of coercion and religious proselytism; we particularly reject the exploitation of the issue of poverty in religious outreach and missionary work.
3. We agree that the giving of aid to those in need is a primary commandment of all our religious and spiritual traditions; we are resolved that this act of justice should never be tied to compulsory conversion.
4. We commit ourselves to a continuing dialogue in the spirit of interreligious harmony, mutual respect, and the cooperative common effort to build a better world.

Swami Chidanand Saraswati

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Fr. Maximillian Mizzi, Assisi

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Rabbi Avraham Soetendorp, Summit International Advisory Board

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This document was drafted, revised, and endorsed by an informal group convened at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, the United Nations, September 2000.