



HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

Hindu American Foundation Policy Brief: Predatory Proselytization and Pluralism

It is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world's progress toward peace. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity? Why should he not be satisfied if the Hindu is a good or godly man? -- Mahatma Gandhi (Harijan, 1937)

Religion is important for humanity, but it should evolve with humanity. The first priority is to establish and develop the principle of pluralism in all religious traditions. If we, the religious leaders, cultivate a sincere pluralistic attitude, then everything will be more simple. It is good that most religious leaders are at least beginning to recognize other traditions, even though they may not approve of them. The next step is to accept that the idea of propagating religion is outdated. It no longer suits the times. -- H.H. Dalai Lama (All the People: A Conversation with the Dalai Lama on Money, Politics, and Life as it Could Be, 1999)

Religious freedom: The right to retain one's traditions

Religious freedom – it is a fundamental human right, declared not only by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, but by most free nations. That every individual “has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Yet today, this inalienable right stands compromised for billions around the world. Over 60 years after the conception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and despite some corrective measures made in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to include more diverse understandings of religious freedom, “religious freedom” fails to recognize, at the expense of adherents of pluralist and non-exclusivist religious traditions, the right **to retain** one's tradition and **to be free from** religious intrusion, harassment, intimidation, and exploitative and predatory proselytization. Such religious and cultural interference, primarily at the hands of non-pluralist and exclusivist religionists, has over the centuries lead to the extinction of entire cultures and civilizations, and today, continues to result in fraudulent, forced, coerced, or provoked religious conversion (hereinafter “unethical conversion”).

Non-pluralist vs. Pluralist religions: The differences and the cost of global asymmetries

In every sense, non-pluralist religions are diametrically oppositional to traditionally pluralist religions.

Non-pluralist religions often demand exclusive adherence (vis a vis conversion) based on the claim that theirs is the only legitimate way. In contrast, pluralist religious traditions, including most Dharmic, Eastern, non-Abrahamic, and indigenous religious traditions, generally have a more expansive ethos at their core -- that one's religious tradition may not be the exclusive source of Truth and which acknowledge the potential existence of multiple, legitimate religious and spiritual paths. Most pluralist religious traditions are also non-exclusivist, thus allowing for the assimilation of beliefs and traditions of another religion, but without requiring the relinquishment of one's own religion or conversion to the other.

If left unchanged, the current and prevalent understanding of religious freedom, and the rights and protections proffered by international law will continue to foster global asymmetries in favor of non-pluralist religions. Such an imbalance in power and influence have already proven historically to promote various forms of inter-religious tensions and violent conflict, religious imperialism and supremacy, terrorism, and ultimately, the annihilation of more pluralistic peoples, cultures, and traditions.

Collective Complacency to ICCPR Violations

UN Member States have for too long turned a blind eye to flagrant violations of §2 of the ICCPR -- that "no one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." Predatory proselytization and the resulting unethical conversions by non-pluralist and exclusivist religionists -- conversions that have been carried out for centuries in various parts of the world, including Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (the 10-40 Window), North and South America, as well as Europe -- can no longer be ignored and must be prosecuted as violations of human rights.

Today's collective complacency has also bred a surge in international conversion campaigns which continue to harass, intimidate, and exploit the most vulnerable segments of society through unethical means. Such means include the conditioning of humanitarian aid or economic, educational, medical, and social assistance on conversion; denigrating other religions to sell the "primacy" of another religion; or knowingly and intentionally promoting religious hatred, bigotry, and even violence. Conversions gained through material enticement, denigration, or the promotion of bigotry, as opposed to genuine, "of the heart" conversions, must be recognized for what they are -- unethical.

Conversion campaigns, the majority of which are funded by American, Australian, and many European faith-based organizations, deny a vast majority of the world's people respect, dignity, and religious freedom, and more alarmingly, are creating deep and open conflict throughout the rest of world. And though these campaigns may be carried out by private citizens, the diplomatic responsibility and cost for dealing with resulting conflicts ultimately rests on the shoulders of the nations to which these individuals and organizations belong.

Proposed Amendments to UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ICCPR

We at the Hindu American Foundation hold that the integrity of Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ICCPR is endangered today as a result of the failure to incorporate more pluralist understandings of religious freedom as well as the international community's complacency towards unethical conversions. As such, religious freedom, as it stands today, is perversely at odds with tolerance, pluralism, and most importantly, peace within and across national borders. The Hindu American Foundation calls upon the international community and the United Nations for the following:

1. Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights be amended as follows (in bold italics):
 - a. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to ***retain, adopt or*** change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.
2. Article 18 of the ICCPR be amended, in part, as follows (in bold italics):
 - a. §1 Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have, ***retain*** or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
 - b. §2 No one shall be subject to ***force, fraud and/or*** coercion, ***including but not limited to harassment, intimidation or exploitation, the conditioning of humanitarian aid or economic, educational, medical or social assistance upon conversion and/or overt denigration of other religions to intentionally promote religious hatred, bigotry, and violence,*** which would impair his freedom to have, ***to retain*** or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Demand Assembly Member States to enforce and implement preventative measures to enforce §2 of the ICCPR.
4. Demand Assembly Member States to monitor more closely, prosecute, and condemn violations of §2 of the ICCPR.
5. Facilitate cooperation between pluralist and non-pluralist religions to develop ethical guidelines for interfaith dialogue and interaction, proselytization, and conversion.

Notes:

The concept of "retaining" one's religion as a fundamental human right was also proposed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions*ⁱ and endorsed by four Nobel Laureates, including His Holiness The Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, and Shirin Ebadi, at the World Religions after 9/11 Congressⁱⁱ. The 2003 Congress, hosted by Professor Arvind Sharma, commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Faculty of Religious

Studies, at McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

ⁱ Web. <<http://www.worldsreligionsafter911.com/pdf/UDHRWR.pdf>>

ⁱⁱ *World's Religions after 911*. Web. 08 July 2011. <<http://www.worldsreligionsafter911.com/>>.