141

<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/03/proselytism_and_religious_liberty.html>

**America as a missionary society**

*Is there a problem with proselytism overseas by U.S. religious groups? Isn't sharing one's faith part of religious freedom? When does it cross the line into manipulation and coercion?*

1...."Is there a problem with proselytism....?" Of course there's a problem! The problem is that a historically neutral word has acquired a heavily *negative connotation*, including "manipulation and coercion." Let's take the spin off the question: Is there a problem with U.S. religious groups teaching overseas with the intention of persuading to their convictions? And now let's take the slant off: Is there a problem with one nation's religious groups teaching in another nation with the intention of persuading to their convictions? Finally, the basic-human-value question: Should people be free to communicate their convictions anywhere on earth?

2.....My answer to the basic-human-value question, namely, freedom of speech/press/assembly/petition (as in our First Amendment), is YES, with the provisos that the communication be nonviolent in (1) means and (2) content. If violence ensues, the duty of government is to suppress not the communication but the violence. Positively put, public opinion always and everywhere should be determined by *persuasion*, not by coercive promotion or suppression.

3.....But always and everywhere, persuasive efforts to change personal and public opinion are a problem for*change-resisters*. America is history's least change-resistant society, most open to hear persuaders, closed only to the violent. We are closed, must be closed, to those whose program of persuasion includes violent disruption of what is (namely, our way of life and constitutional law) as prelude to what the movement's promoters see as what should be (namely, the Muslim way of life and sharia law). We have "a problem" not with Islam in general but with one of its current movements, namely, terrorist-jihadist Islamism (violent Muslim fundamentalism).

4.....Now let's shrink the first question down to this: "Is there a problem oversees with U.S. proselytism [America's world-wide promotion of its creed]?" America is a missionary forfreedom, and every place on earth that wants less freedom has a problem with our people and nation. America HAS "religious groups" that promote overseas; but also America IS a religious group ("church" in the general sense) in that it has and lives a creed. A century ago, G.K.Chesterton said, "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed [as in the Declaration of Independence]." It is "a nation with the soul of a church." The creed both rejects atheism (which denies that human rights are God-given) and protects atheists. Gunnar Myrdal saw American history as "the gradual realization of its Creed." And in his best-remembered speech, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have a dream that one day this nation shall rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed."

5.....America's creed has always been missionary in the sense that its message is for "all men" as "created equal." Fifty-six years before those words appeared in our Declaration of Independence, America's first political document - the Mayflower Compact - proclaimed the intention, in founding a colony "for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith," to establish "just and equal laws."
If America were an empire, we would be interested in extending our territory; but since we are interested only in extending our ideas and advancing their interests, we are *a missionary society*. And what we preach is of course resented by the preachers, religions, institutions, governments whose messages compete with ours. This ideas-warfare (in Greek, "logomachy") is not a deviation but a characteristic of humanity "as we know it." What is a deviation is coercive intervention in the warfare.

6.....In America, because of our peculiar libertarian "exceptionalism," no one need fear coercive intervention in the war of ideas. An imam missionary from Yemen became an American citizen, set up a mission station, and began making converts to Islam. No problem: we believe in religious liberty. His program includes holding a mission meeting in liberal churches immediately after Sunday morning worship. His meeting begins with the witness of a recent convert aglow with honeymoon new love, then continues with his sermon on how Islam is superior to Christianity. At one of his meetings, when he attacked the Christian God I yelled "Blasphemy!" The resulting *vigorous interaction is what the practice of religious liberty needs for its health.*

7.....Last week's question involved the recent Chicago document on religion and U.S. foreign policy. This is in the document: "Religious freedom is a universal religious right and a source of social and political stability." But a right unexercised shrivels and dies. The imam from Yemen is interested in the *death*of religious liberty (by the imposition of Muslim law, sharia); by yelling "Blasphemy!" at him, I invigorated the right of religious liberty. And indirectly, I challenged sharia, and Yemen's right to execute me and my converts from Islam if I were to go to Yemen as a Christian missionary.

8....We are "hierarchical animals," and war is not optional for our species. We have been evolving from wars of muscle to wars of mouth, from wars of swords to wars of words, from wars of coercion to wars of persuasion. I worry more about the nonviolent silent than about the violent, who*win if the nonviolent keep silent*.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  MARCH 3, 2010; 2:03 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**THE 'PROBLEM' OF PROSELYTISM**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/chris_seiple/2010/03/the_problem_of_proselytism.html)**| NEXT:**[**IN HAITI: FIRST CONTACT**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/mark_driscoll/2010/03/in_haiti_first_contact.html)

**Comments**

**Please report offensive comments below.**

hello dr E,

you need to put your theological and ideological papers togther befor your mission.

did you ever study the thelogical era befor and after jesus ?do you know the thelological era of moses and the laws of moses do you know the thelogical era of muhamed ?

with all due respect to the mercifull messeage of jesus, but is the messeasge of moses viloent?or unmercifull?is the message of mohamed violent or unmercifull?why juchristianity tend to separate ?

momotheism means one god and it also mean one word of god above all whether carried by jesus or moses or mohamed or any messenger of good .

juchristianity not only tend to separate but is not even sure about the god? is he jesus or the father or the trinity or the incarnation ?

the absence of the god in juchristianity push people to human secularism .

the american mission is tribal,local and ununiversal.

**POSTED BY: MONO1 | MARCH 8, 2010 2:34 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

To elliottwl --- Thanks for clear consistent standard.

Question 1: What is the real problem with proselytism overseas by U.S. religious groups?
Answer 1: The root cause of problem with proselytism overseas by some U.S. religious groups is their genuine belief that target's religion is path to eternal damnation. It is extremely difficult to respect path to hell. Hence, Many proselytisers start walking on tensed and slippery slope of "disrespectful tolerance". Some in their righteous zeal to save slip into unethical verbal violence, immoral manipulation and illegal coercion.

Question 2: Isn't sharing one's faith part of religious freedom?
Answer 2: Yes. Both sharing and practising one's faith is part of religious freedom. Sharing should not inhibit practising and vice versa.

Question 3: When does it cross the line into manipulation and coercion?
Answer 3: When a proselytiser slips from "disrespectful tolerance" to "illegal coercion". Thus, Inhibiting target's right to practise his or her current faith.

Visit: www.uscirf.blogspot.com for details.

**POSTED BY: REFORMUSCIRF | MARCH 7, 2010 1:42 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO MONO1
1
I strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq.
2
I agree with you that the American government should not be promoting, abroad, either what you call "juchristianity" or "secularism." I titled my column "Proselytism and religious liberty" (the editor changed it to "America as a missionary society"). The mission I referred to is limited to what I said, the promotion of religious freedom and equality.
3
I am a Christian, & I speak (as in my present OnFaith column) for persuasion & against violence. Unlike Islam, Christinity's first two centuries were, as was Jesus, entirely nonviolent.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 7, 2010 11:37 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO REFORMUSCIRF

Anyone yelling "Unfair!" in the situation you describe is exercising, not violating, freedom of speech.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 7, 2010 11:22 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Willis wrote "At one of his (i.e. Imam's) meetings, when he (i.e. imam) attacked the Christian God I yelled "Blasphemy!" The resulting vigorous interaction is what the practice of religious liberty needs for its health.....by yelling "Blasphemy!" at him, I invigorated the right of religious liberty."

Change the venue to the new wild wild east (e.g. tribal land in india) and the role reverses. It is the christian minister attacking hindu/tribal God and distributing pamplets depicting him as murderers, rapist and what not (eg. pamplet in manglore,india). Anyone yelling "Unfair" is depicted as violator of freedom of speech/religion.

How could an action be described as "invigorating the right of religious liberty" in one situation and "violating the right of religious liberty" in another similar situation?

Visit: www.uscirf.blogspot.com for details.

**POSTED BY: REFORMUSCIRF | MARCH 6, 2010 3:45 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

the american mission in iraq.

saint bush the democraz carried the banner of liberty on his head and shoulder ,carried the juchristian bible in one hand and the democratic secular human bible in the other hand, invaded iraq,

the job accomplished on the dead and stranded body of more than 5 million human being.

the 2 master think tanks of the american missionary society (juchristianity +human seularism)is too primitive too backward.

serious overhaull is hi ly needed.

**POSTED BY: MONO1 | MARCH 6, 2010 2:12 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

PROSELYTIZATION is a manifestation of the SUPREMACIST foundation of Christianity & Islam.

No one else has this serious flaw that Christians and Muslims have in their "religions" or spiritual systems. Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jews, Wiccans, Animists, etc.. are all trying to make themselves better, not trying to undermine others.
Conversion has caused some of the biggest problems in third world countries.
The "charity" and "kind deeds" are insincere and deceptive actions, and therefore, are acts of evil.

Muslims & Christians don't seem to get the basics of goodness and spirituality. Pretending to be good while having and ulterior motive fools no one and is an act of evil. This can lead to crusades and suicide terrorism.
REMEMBER: Almost all religious conflicts in the world involve Muslims or Christians on one side or both.
Sneakiness, deception, conversion, undermining other cultures, etc... is offensive and nonspiritual.

You really feel the urge to do charity? Go to the inner city in America and help those in need. Look in your own family and help those who are depressed or drunk or angry.
Stop going to 3rd world countries and causing problems & hurting others.

**POSTED BY: CLEARTHINKING1 | MARCH 5, 2010 4:46 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I'm tired of people criticizing the Founders and the Declaration of Independence over slavery.

If Africans weren't willing to sell their brothers and sisters for the going rate, there wouldn't have been slaves in the US. There never were any American armies in Africa catching slaves. In fact, relatively few Europeans were doing it. It was Europeans (primarily Portuguese shipping slaves to Brazil)at a few coastal ports buying wholesale from Africans who were very willing to catch and sell people (often from the tribe around the corner) for a price. Europeans then sold some slaves retail to some Americans.

People may remember the movie a decade or two ago about the Amistead, a story of slaves who mutinied on a Cuban ship and won freedom in the US courts. What the movie left out is that Cinque, the mutiny leader, went back to Africa and made money in the slave trade. People don't want to hear that part of the story so they left it out of the movie, but that's the history.

So, if Africans were making money selling other Africans, stop beating up the Founders and the Declaration of Independence for imperfections that were common at the time. The Declaration of Independence set this country on the right path. The Founders weren't saints, but they achieved great things with great ideas. I'm tired of people belittling their achievements, because they weren't perfect.

**POSTED BY: JFV123 | MARCH 4, 2010 5:21 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

What garbage from a demented old man? It's fashionable and convenient for these "faith stealers" to wave anything in front of other people and try to "persuade" them to adopt a different belief systems. Look at the Christian "loan" schemes in India that Baptist missionaries are engaging in - loans will be waived if you convert, otherwise their henchman will be at your door the next day.

**POSTED BY: NPARRY | MARCH 4, 2010 5:04 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Missionaries SHOULD concern themselves with improving and overcoming their own faults instead of trying to push their religious beliefs on onto others.

**POSTED BY: LUFRANK1 | MARCH 4, 2010 4:19 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Creed: Officially authorized, usually brief statement of the essential articles of faith of a religious community, often used in public worship or initiation rites. Creeds are most numerous in Western traditions.

Chesterton must have extended this definition to embrace secular political philosophies as well as religious communities. While some may see the U.S. as a quasi religious community, this is far from certain as it is still officially a secular state. One thing that is certain is that the U.S. is not the only nation that could be considered a quasi religious nation exporting a creed; this would apply to any nation ruled by an overarching dogma. Examples would be revolutionary France, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, etc. Chesterton ignoring these communities of zealots proselytizing their creeds is an example of the hubris of Western democracies and implies that only they have the grace of God and only they can set the ignorant heathens on the holy road. In the Philippines it was our duty to civilize, Christianize and democratize our “little brown brothers” (by the way, water boarding was used to great effect on the Pilipino insurrectionists). The jury is still out as to whether that was a success. As far as proselytizing, our government is within its charter to preach the gospel of free trade, laissez faire capitalism, etc., but leave religion and other supernatural subjects (although there are those who would say laissez faire capitalism and the image of rugged individualism is in that category) out of the curriculum. When will we come to understand that our concept of individual freedom is subjective and not chiseled in stone from on high and that while it makes sense and plays well in its cradle in the West it can be counterproductive and destructive for nations with other histories.

**POSTED BY: CSINTALA79 | MARCH 4, 2010 4:03 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Stop spreading your magical thinking around the world. Mind your own business.

**POSTED BY: JCKDOORS | MARCH 4, 2010 3:45 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

"if America were an empire"

Hate to point this out,but you are an empire. You started as a small group of colonies on the east coast and expanded across to the west coast and out into the pacific.

**POSTED BY: GMARTIN-ROYLE | MARCH 4, 2010 2:51 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Last month the Haitian government accused ten Southern Baptists of kidnapping 33 "orphan" children. Please consider the following:

1) Is it almost certain that the Southern Baptists were lying when they claimed that the children were orphans. The kids were freely given up by their parents but that does not make them "orphans."

2) The Southern Baptists have a centuries-long tradition of kidnapping blacks. Indeed, this cult was founded for the purpose of giving a theological justification to the practice of slavery.

3) At their national convention during the summer of 2000, the Southern Baptists renounced the authority of Jesus Christ over their church, hence the term "cult."

**POSTED BY: RBDAVE | MARCH 4, 2010 11:26 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Dr. Elliott said:
America is history's least change-resistant society, most open to hear persuaders, closed only to the violent.

Oh, if only it were so. But in fact, your conclusion is in stark contrast to the interview I heard with Jon Meacham just this morning. In fact, our country is founded, not on Christian principles as much as you claim, but on resistance to change. The structure of our national government is designed around resistance to change where a single senator can hold up legislation or when it takes 60% to pass legislation of significance.

Look around at the major issues confronting our country, health care being one such example. We have been trying to redesign our health care system since Teddy Roosevelt's administration.

History tells us that we are resistant to change and change only comes slowly after years of effort from many generations of people.

You also said:
America is a missionary for freedom, and every place on earth that wants less freedom has a problem with our people and nation.

With all due respect, America "talks" about freedom and democracy but we don't always practice what we preach. President Bush attacked a country that never attacked us and was not linked to those that did attack us. We tried to shove democracy down their throats but what we really did was preach to them about what their country should be like, while making exceptions for how we supported freedom here.

While we were preaching freedom to a country (Iraq) we took prisoners and fought every step of the way, these same prisoners being free enough to even challenge their detention. Remember "enemy combatants", a new designation created just to avoid having to offer even the most fundamental freedoms to prisoners of war.

Although it is true that we have no goals of territorial expansion, America is certainly a country that arrogantly thinks that all countries should work the way we do. Just like the arrogance of religion where each one thinks that only their beliefs are "true", America, under Bush, believed that only our idea of democracy represents freedom.

**POSTED BY: TWMATTHEWS | MARCH 4, 2010 11:20 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

My brother is a pentecostal missionary.

I met a woman downtown last year and we talked for several minutes. She recognized my name and said Are you Chuck's brother?

Yes, I replied. We talked some more and then she said Are you a Christian?

"No Ma'am. I'm a Lutheran."

**POSTED BY: RBDAVE | MARCH 4, 2010 10:48 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Dr. Elliott speaks of American Exceptionalism" as though it were a virtue. In fact it is a handicap to improving communication and understanding among peoples. Any jew, christian or muslim who says "my god is greater than your god" is simply ignorant of the fact that all three religions worship the same god, with the exception that only christians insist that their god is really 3 gods. This belief, decided by vote hundreds of years after Jesus died, is considered blashamous by most non christians and some christians as well.

**POSTED BY: KITTYMEREDITH | MARCH 4, 2010 10:10 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The 'negative connotations' come from \*negative experiences\* due to \*negative behaviors\* on the part of proselytizers, who go hand in hand with colonialism and the willful obliteration of cultures.

We can see more and more in Haiti how Evangelicals are trying to get more and more people of traditional beliefs to convert in order to feed their families, or be denied food if they appear too 'Voudou,' ...While people who take aid as a pretext for aggressive proselytizing (and thus claim there is some inferiority to others) deny they apply these pressures and discriminations, it's all too common under more routine circumstances as well.

**POSTED BY: APAGANPLACE | MARCH 4, 2010 9:58 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

poppycock!

**POSTED BY: STEPHENRHYMER | MARCH 4, 2010 9:31 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I am terrified of religious people. Also they apparently never ask their god to do something for the starving billions.

**POSTED BY: DAVIDSAWH | MARCH 4, 2010 9:24 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I personally don't wish to take
the missionary position in
one very important aspect
of life - SEX !!!

Bend over and drop your drawers
Sarah Palin. Me and my ball bat
are cum'in' after you !!!!!!!

**POSTED BY: FLYERSOUT | MARCH 4, 2010 7:46 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Our "creed" should be that of freedom, not religion. Why do we, as citizens of the United States, think that we are always right in everything? We can see by the Crusades and other instances in history where the pushing of one religious group over another has led to nothing but bloodshed, torture, and grief.

"My God's better than your God" - "If you don't belong to my church, you are not going to heaven" - "My version of the Bible is true and yours is not" - "God is damning those blasphemers and non-believers with natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes". In the last instance, that would make God a mass murderer of innocent and guilty alike, wouldn't it?

I can imagine what some in other countries feel when "missionaries" come to their door, since I have had repeated visits from certain religious groups even after telling them to NOT come to my doorstep again. We may have freedom OF religion, but we also need freedom FROM religion, and so do others in other countries.

**POSTED BY: UTAHREB | MARCH 4, 2010 7:44 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I appreciate the commitment to nonviolence, but it's difficult to think of a guide less suitable to such an approach then the bible. In fact, there's no way to be an observant christian (or jew) and not be in jail. If believers actually followed the teachings of "god," they would be executed for the crimes we are commmanded to enact by the bible.

**POSTED BY: MATTHEWBRENSILVER | MARCH 4, 2010 1:40 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

It gets very tiresome to hear the phrases: "All Men are Created Equal", "Just and Equal Laws", etc., etc., etc., in trying to make the point that the United States was founded upon such principles. These phrases should include the qualification: "Except that it shall be lawful to own other men, in the bondage of slavery because the Bible does not prohibit such a small deviation."

**POSTED BY: CENTRAL1942 | MARCH 3, 2010 10:04 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

The comments to this entry are closed.