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Proselytizing and Evangelizing — Is There Any Difference?

According to Wikipedia, proselytizing is the attempt of any religion or religious individuals to convert people to their beliefs, or any attempt to convert people to a different point of view, religious or not. The term is sometimes understood as pejorative. The World Council of Churches has indicated that, used pejoratively, proselytism refers to attempts at conversion by 'unjust means that violate the conscience of the human person', such as by coercion or bribery.

In contrast to proselytizing, which is aimed at a conversion process from one belief system to another, evangelizing is mainly a Christian activity. Evangelicals believe in the centrality of the conversion or "born again" experience in receiving salvation, in accordance with the Bible as God's revelation to humanity, and in spreading the Christian message.

So, there are differences, but there are also similarities. Both involve conversions, but evangelism is uniquely Christian while proselytizing is usually a conversion from one religion, or no religion to another one. For example, converting so-called heathens to Christianity is proselytizing, whereas evangelical missionaries converting Catholics in South America into "born again" Protestants is evangelizing.

Proselytizing

Not all religions proselytize. Among those that do not are Judaism and the Dharmic religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Among those that do proselytize are Christians, Islamists and Baha'is.

Christians

For two millennia, Christian Churches have been very successful proselytizers. Beginning with a few churches established by the apostle Paul in eastern Mediterranean cities in the first century CE, Christianity spread throughout Europe and later to North, Central, and South America. At its peak Christianity boasted 2.2 million members or adherents. In this endeavour, Christian proselytizers were following Jesus' instructions — "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with

you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Matthew 28:19-20, KGV). Similar but shorter instructions occur in the final chapters of Mark and Luke.

The evolution of Christianity is described in some detail in the July 2019 Enlightenment and need not be repeated here. The end result is that Europe, North, Central, and South America, as well as Australia and New Zealand are deemed to be essentially Christian countries, although some are gradually becoming more secular. The term Christendom is sometimes used to designate the conglomerate of Christian countries.

Going back to Jesus' instructions quoted above, these words were never spoken by a live Jesus of Nazareth. They were put into the mouth of a supposedly resurrected Jesus-the-Christ by the writer of Matthew. If it is conceded that a resurrection from the dead is impossible, these words were never spoken by anybody. These instructions were invented by the gospel writers to help promote the establishment of the early Christian churches and promote the Christian message of salvation.

Although in the past there have certainly been instances of conversion to Christianity by coercion, sometimes cruel as in inquisitions and burnings at the state, the conversion of so-called heathens, pagans or savages to Christianity has generally been, and still is, a non-violent endeavour. This, however, is not the case with Islam.

Islamists

In Islam, inviting people to the religion is a meritorious activity. The Qur'an states, "There is no (permission) to force (anyone into following this) way of life. The truth stands clear from error. Whoever rejects falsehood and believes in Allah has grasped a firm handhold that will never break, for Allah hears and knows (all things). Al Baqarah ('The Cow', 2:256)". Muslim scholars consider this passage to mean that force is not to be used to convert someone to Islam. Muslims consider inviting others to Islam to be the mission originally carried out by the Prophets of Allah and is now a collective duty of Muslims. In the Qur'an, Allah states, "Invite (others) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and reason with them in ways that are best. Your Lord knows best who is straying from His path and who is being guided (towards it). An Nahl ('The Bee', 16:125)" (Taken from Wikipedia).

Although it is stated above that force is not to be used to convert someone to Islam, and while today most of the billion-plus Muslims on the planet are not engaged in jihad, there are some that are. And it should be noted that it was by the sword that Islam spread so rapidly after the death of Muhammad in 632 CE as his teachings lived on. Muslim warriors, energized by his exhortations to jihad and his example in unifying Arabia, embarked on a series of conquests unprecedented in their breadth and swiftness: Syria and the Holy Land by 637, Armenia and Egypt in 639, Cyprus in 654, and North Africa by the 660s. By 674 the Muslims were besieging Constantinople. But why were these conquests so successful? Most probably because by the seventh century, the Byzantines were so exhausted from their protracted wars with Persia, they left a vacuum that the Arabs easily filled. In any case, the end result is that now, fourteen hundred years after its birth, Islam influences, in varying degrees, numerous countries that stretch from northwest Africa to the Philippines. Muslims around the globe readily accept the broad contours of Islam that has been told and retold for centuries. But violent force is still going on, with organizations such as al Qaeda in Afghanistan, ISIS in Syria, and Boko Haram in Nigeria, all wanting to establish theocratic Caliphates ruled by Sharia law. Yes, proselytizing by force is still going on in certain Islamist circles.

Although the right to convert to another religion and to manifest religion is enshrined in Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the World Council of Churches affirms that conversion by unjust means such as by coercion or bribery violates the conscience of human persons. Unfortunately, attempts at conversion by coercion are still with us today. Islamic jihad is mentioned above and in western China up to 1.5 million Muslim Uyghurs are being held in re-education camps where physical and psychological torture is being applied in conversion attempts, presumably to Chinese secularism.

It is most regrettable, in this day and age, that religious differences are causing the suffering of largely innocent people, particularly children. But there is one religion that endeavours to attract people by directing them toward a path that will bring peace and justice to the world by exercising moderation, tact, and wisdom. They use the term “teaching” rather than proselytizing. That religion is Baha'i.

Baha'i

The Baha'i faith is a monotheistic religion founded in Persia in 1863 by Baha'u'llah, who believed he was the last of a string of prophets dating back to Abraham. Today the Baha'i headquarters is in Haifa Israel. Baha'is advocate universal peace and unity among all races, nations, and religions. There are seven million Baha'i adherents scattered among over a hundred countries throughout the world. Most congregations are relatively small, often meeting in private homes. There are seven large magnificent Baha'i Temples, all featuring large domes. They are located in the United States, Australia, Uganda, Germany, Panama, Samoa, and India. There is a small Baha'i congregation in London, Ontario, meeting in a private home on Concord Crescent.

I mention Baha'i along with Christianity and Islam because it is a third monotheistic religion that seeks converts through proselytizing, although Baha'is prefer the term “teaching.”

Proselytizing in Canada — Indigenous Residential Schools

The Canada Indigenous residential school system, a black mark on Canadian history, was a network of boarding schools for Indigenous peoples. The network was funded by the Canadian government's Department of Indian Affairs and administered by Christian churches. The school system was created for the purpose of removing Indigenous children from the influence of their own culture and assimilating them into the dominant Canadian culture, "to kill the Indian in the child." Thus, there was a dual purpose: to integrate indigenous children into Canadian society, and to convert "savage heathens" into Christians. This was proselytizing big time, and the Churches will claim some success. Today about two thirds of indigenous people are Christians.

The first Canadian Indian residential school opened in Brantford, Ontario, in 1831. The last closed in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, in 1996. Over the course of the system's more than hundred-year existence, about 30 per cent of Indigenous children (around 150,000) were placed in residential schools nationally. The number of school-related deaths remains unknown due to an incomplete historical record, though estimates range from 3,200 upwards of 6,000. Separating children from their parents is wrong and even cruel, causing severe psychological stress. Children in the schools also suffered physical abuse, with excessive use of the strap, as well as sexual abuse by some staff members. Malnutrition was also present. The legacy of the system has been

linked to an increased prevalence of posttraumatic stress, alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicide, which persist within Indigenous communities today.

Indigenous religious practices varied from tribe to tribe, but a commonality seems to be belief in a great spirit that created and controls the world. The Algonquins called this spirit the Great Manitou, hence the name Manitoulin Island. Various religious ceremonies were observed, Potlaches in the West and Sun Dances on the Prairies. Respect for nature was always present because survival depended on preserving the natural resources that existed around then. All in all, the indigenous religious practices were far more suited to the indigenous culture than what was imposed on children in residential schools. Fortunately, past wrongs have now been recognized and steps have been taken to make amends.

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered a public apology on behalf of the Government of Canada and the leaders of the other federal parties in the House of Commons. Nine days prior, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established to uncover the truth about the schools. The commission gathered about 7,000 statements from residential school survivors through public and private meetings at various local, regional, and national events across Canada. Seven national events held between 2008 and 2013 commemorated the experience of former students of residential schools. In 2015, the TRC ended with the establishment of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, and the publication of a multi-volume report detailing the testimonies of survivors and historical documents from the time. The TRC report concluded that the school system amounted to cultural genocide.

Both Governments and Churches have worked out financial compensations for residential school survivors, but it seems to be difficult to ascertain exact details of these settlements.

Missionaries

In Canada and the United States, settlers simply brought the religion of their homeland with them. Catholic churches were established in Quebec and Louisiana, and Protestant churches elsewhere. In Central and South America, the Spanish settlers brought Catholicism with them, but the Catholic Church also established a network of missions to convert natives to Christianity. The Alamo in San Antonio Texas is probably the most famous mission, followed by the one still operating as a church in Capistrano, California, famous for the return of the swallows each spring. Today the Latin American countries are still essentially Catholic, but Protestant evangelicals are attempting to move in in some areas.

In the rest of the world, European and North American main line Churches have been sending Christian missionaries to African and Asian countries ever since transportation became available. They were following the dictum quoted at the top of page 2 to spread the gospel to all nations. While they may have earnestly believed they were saving the souls of heathens, like the situation in Canada with residential schools, saving of souls, can I believe, be a questionable endeavour.

Fortunately, many of today's Christian missionaries are more concerned with human rights than proselytizing, and some are medical missionaries bringing medical care to where it is much needed. Nondenominational Doctors Without Borders is an example. Dr. Albert Schweitzer in Africa and Dr Norman Bethune in China, both became famous as medical missionaries.

Missionaries at Your Front Door

Who among us has not answered our doorbell only to find either Mormon missionaries or Jehovah's Witnesses on our doorstep?

All Mormon teenagers are encouraged to spend two years, often abroad, attempting to convince non-Mormon individuals to become members of the Mormon religion, through a process of learning about Mormonism, culminating in total immersion baptism when a person decides to join. These missionaries, whether male or female, are always polite and well-dressed. But they face a huge challenge convincing anyone to believe in the weird teachings of Joseph Smith, the so-called prophet who founded Mormonism in the early 1800s. After about 180 years of proselytizing, there are only 15-16 million Mormons worldwide

Like the Mormon missionaries, Jehovah's Witnesses usually arrive in pairs, sometimes accompanied by a young child. Their message, promoted through their Watchtower magazine, is essentially about the coming Armageddon, at which time 144,000 righteous Jehovah's Witnesses will be raptured into heaven. How this number jibes with the 8.4 million Witnesses world-wide is difficult to fathom. The callers are basically a nuisance as they keep coming back. Recently I told them I am humanist and do not believe in God. Before long they were back feeling sorry for me because I do not believe in God. They wanted to save me, but I impolitely shooed them away and so far, they have not been back.

Evangelizing

Evangelists are essentially attempting to convince potential converts that they must be "saved" in order to be guaranteed entry into heaven, heaven being some mysterious place where God resides, and immortality is assured. The existence of heaven is mainly a Christian and Muslim belief. It was never a big issue with the Jews. Others, including Hindus and some Buddhists, do not believe in an eternal heaven, but instead believe in reincarnation. And of course, humanists reject both heaven and reincarnation outright.

As stated in the definition of evangelism in the second paragraph on page 1, evangelism is essentially an evangelical Protestant endeavour extoling an exclusive way of entry into heaven by being "born again." Main line Protestants, however, seem to believe having faith in God and living a moral and ethical lifestyle will assure an eternal life. In contrast, Catholics are told that observing the sacraments of the Church is the route to heaven. And Muslims believe that observing the five pillars of Islam will lead to heavenly bliss. So which avenue is the right one? None, according to humanists, because heaven does not exist.

After this diversion about heaven, back to Evangelicalism, a movement that has unfortunately achieved political influence, particularly in the United States. The origins of Protestant evangelicalism are usually traced to 1738, with various theological streams contributing to its foundation, including English Methodism and German Lutheran Pietism. Pre-eminently, John Wesley and other early Methodists were at the root of sparking this new movement during the First Great Awakening. Today, evangelicals are found across many Protestant branches, as well as in various denominations not subsumed to a specific branch. Among leaders and major figures of the earlier evangelical Protestant movement were John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Dwight L. Moody. The movement gained great momentum during the 18th and 19th centuries with the Great Awakenings in Great Britain and the United States. Sometimes meetings were held in tents.

In the early 20th century there were Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson (who was born near Salford, Ontario, not far from London). They operated from permanent Church buildings, but by mid-century Billy Graham was holding revival meetings in stadiums where thousands participated in an altar call to ostensibly be "born again." Towards the end of the 20th century, TV evangelists became prominent. Among them were Oral Roberts, Jim and Tammy Baker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Robert Schuller. In the 21st century, megachurches began to appear with the largest being led by Joel Osteen with a reputed 43,000 adherents. He has a television audience of seven million viewers in 100 countries. He has written ten best-selling books. His messages are upbeat, and he seems to be saying that God wants you to be wealthy.

Speaking of books, there are the unbelievable sales of books by Rev. Rick Warren of the mega Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, as well as books by Rev. Timothy LaHaye. Warren has written about thirty books, the most popular being various editions of *A Purpose Driven Life*, selling over thirty million copies in all. LaHaye's *Left Behind* series of sixteen novels about biblical prophecies and the "end times," coauthored with Jerry B. Jenkins, has sold over eighty million copies. Why are so many people wanting to read this stuff? Are they dissatisfied with life and find these books to be inspirational or some sort of crutch?

Another question. Why is evangelicalism so popular in the United States at a time when attendance at mainline churches is declining in most other Western countries? Could it be that countries with declining religiosity, and little or no evangelicalism, have adequate social safety nets, in contrast to the United States that has a minimum of social assistance? Notably lacking in the U.S. is government-funded health care for all citizens, something provided in most Western secular democracies. Food for thought.

In 2016, there were an estimated 619 million evangelicals in the world, meaning that one in four Christians would be classified as evangelical. The United States has the largest concentration of evangelicals in the world. American evangelicals are a quarter of the nation's population and its single largest religious group. The main movements are Baptist churches, Evangelical Anglicanism, Wesleyanism Confessional Reformed churches, including the Presbyterian Church in America, Pentecostalism, charismatic Evangelicalism, neo-charismatic Evangelicalism, and nondenominational Christianity. Again, the central theme is the necessity to be "born again" in order to receive salvation and gain entry to heaven.

One of the hallmarks of most democracies is firm separation of church and state. In the United States, however, evangelical Christians have attained a significant influence in government. Today it is almost impossible for a presidential candidate to be elected without winning a majority of evangelical votes. This is a most undesirable situation because evangelicals are against progressive reforms. They oppose abortion and LGBTQ rights including same-sex marriage, as well as the teaching of evolution in high school science classes. They can generally be classified as conservative rather than liberal and are threatening to move backwards rather than forward.

It is a mystery to many that Donald Trump managed to sway the evangelicals in 2016. How could a thrice-married, philandering reprobate convince strait-laced God-fearing evangelicals to vote for him? It's a no-brainer, he lied. He convinced them he believed in God and in what they stand for. Having stacked the Supreme Court with conservatives that threaten to reverse *Roe v Wade*, he will woo them again in 2020 and in doing so could win. What a horrible thought! (DAH).