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The Violence of Conversion: Proselytization and Interreligious Controversy in the Work of Swami Dayananda Saraswati

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Violence of Non-Violence
Research Article

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Abstract: Critics of Christianity in India have frequently accused Christianity of being a predatory, imperialistic religion with absolutist tendencies, and have framed Christian evangelism as an aggressive, uncouth act. More recently, however, and in an idiom that resonates with many contemporary Indians, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930-) has made the more controversial claim that the attempt to convert another person is itself an act of violence. In three parts, the paper 1) describes Dayananda's claims, while bringing them into conversation with the arguments of earlier critics of Christianity (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Sita Ram Goel, Ashok Chowgule, Arun Shourie), 2) analyzes and critique Dayananda's use of the term "violence," and 3) demonstrate how the claim that conversion is an act of violence blurs somewhat easily into a justification of acts of violence against those who attempt to convert others. In the end, I argue that whether Dayananda's claim that proselytization is a form of violence makes sense depends not only on one's definition of "violence," but also on one's definition of "religion."

Though in contemporary media reports, we are today—at least in the West—much more likely to hear of violence perpetrated *against* Christian missionaries, scholars have long recognized violence to be an aspect of the historical Christian missionary movement. Despite its rightful reputation for being a primarily nonviolent affair, there have been well-documented instances of Christians spreading their faith by the actual and metaphorical sword, from at least Emperor Theodosius[1] forward, and especially during the so-called "Barbarian Conversion,"[2] the crusades, the era of European colonialism in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and the Inquisition.

Pointing to that violent legacy, and to what they perceive to be its contemporary manifestations, critics of Christianity in India have frequently accused it of being a predatory, imperialistic religion with absolutist tendencies, and have framed Christian evangelism as an aggressive, uncouth act. Nevertheless, these critics have tended to focus on moments (e.g., the Inquisition), when Christian evangelists have very clearly employed, encouraged, or benefitted from acts of violence or coercion via the implicit or explicit threat of violence. More recently, however, and in an idiom that resonates with many contemporary Indians, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930-) has made the more controversial claim that the attempt to convert another person is *itself* an act of violence.

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1 On which, see Kreider, "Violence and Mission". Portions of this paper draw significantly from material first published in Bauman, *Pentecostals*. I would like to thank the journal's two blind reviewers, who provided thoughtful comment on an earlier version of this paper, and helped transform it from its original, suggestive form into something at least a bit more substantive.
2 Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*.

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In this paper I therefore undertake three primary tasks. First, I describe Dayananda's claims, while placing them in historical context and bringing them into conversation with the arguments of earlier critics of Christianity (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Sita Ram Goel, Ashok Chowgule, Arun Shourie). Second, I analyze and critique Dayananda's use of the term "violence," and consider in what way it might be appropriate to call proselytization, that is, evangelism with the intent of conversion, a kind of "violence." Finally, I suggest that the claim that conversion is an *act* of violence blurs somewhat easily into a justification of acts of violence *against* those who attempt to convert others. In the conclusion, then, I argue that whether Dayananda's claim that proselytization is a form of violence makes sense depends not only on one's definition of "violence," but also on one's definition of "religion."

Dayananda's Historical and Contemporary Context

For those unfamiliar with the Indian scene, some historical and contextual information may be useful. Taking the full millennium and a half of Hindu-Christian relations in India into consideration—the St. Thomas Christians were well established in what is now the Indian state of Kerala no later than the fourth century—the norm is clearly one of relative cordiality. Though there was conflict, sometimes even violent, between groups identified as "Christian" and "Hindu" earlier, the emergence of something we might justifiably call "Hindu-Christian" *religious* conflict emerged only with the arrival of European explorers and colonizers at the end of the fifteenth century.

European colonization had several important effects. First, it associated Indian Christianity ever after with foreign colonialism and its excesses (e.g., the Inquisition, which was fierce in Portugal's Indian territories), and with foreign wealth, power, and favor. Second, European colonization facilitated the expansion of the Christian missionary movement in India, though in fits and starts, and that missionary movement, through its targeting of low-caste converts, shifted the demographic center, and the reputation of Indian Christianity itself, away from the ancient, relatively high-status St. Thomas Christians and towards the relatively low-status convert communities of the missionary era. Third, colonial intrusions in Hindu religious affairs caused a link, in the minds of many intellectuals, between their work for independence, their Indian nationalist pride, and the defense of Hinduism from foreign intervention. Fourth, colonial enumerative and political policies (e.g., censuses which asked religious affiliation, electoral reservations for religious minorities, working through the "natural" religious leaders, etc.) simplified and ossified previously somewhat more syncretic and overlapping Indian religious identities. Finally, urbanization and the development of associational life in India's cities—a function of modernization, to some extent, and not fully dependent on colonization—encouraged not only the development of religion-based societies, but also through national networks of local societies, the *nationalization* of local inter-religious conflict such that a conflict between Hindus and Muslims in colonial Bombay, for example, could come to be seen as a manifestation of some primordial, national "Hindu-Muslim" conflict (similarly, with Hindus and Christians, etc.).

In many ways, then, and through many routes, social and political pressures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries laid the foundation for the emergence of a more aggressively anti-minority and pan-Indian Hindu nationalism. It is important to keep in mind, however, that during this same period there was a great deal of cooperation between Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities and associations. There were also many inclusive, liberal-minded organizations active in the era. It is also worth noting that the developments just described were primarily urban, and had a far less significant effect on India's vast rural hinterlands.[3]

The development of communalism among certain Hindu associations formed during the late nineteenth century was therefore not an inexorable fate, nor was it the only turn that historical events could have taken. The enumerative policies of political representation did quite clearly contribute to the rising prominence of what we would now call "communalism" (what outside of India is usually called "sectarianism"). But other,

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[3] Bayly, "The Pre-History," 180.

more cooperative and inclusive ideologies vied with communalism for power and influence, as they still do today, a continuing testament to what Sanjay Joshi has termed the "fractured" nature of Indian modernity.[4]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British policies continued to antagonize India's elites. There were, of course, the electoral policies described above, as well as economic policies which progressively favored tenants over landholders. But there were also in this era (though less frequently than before the Indian Rebellion in the 1850s) periodic British interventions into Indian social and religious affairs. All the while, Christianity was gaining converts in significant numbers, due in part at least to a series of devastating famines throughout India during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, which encouraged conversions among those grateful to have been fed by missionaries (often with colonial financial support) and created a large cohort of famine orphans, many of whom had been born non-Christian but who were nevertheless raised Christian in Christian orphanages.[5] As a result of these political and demographic changes, many advocates of Hinduism began to assert that the growth of Christianity represented a serious threat to the Hindu faith, and could even lead to its extinction, as U.N. Mukherji suggested in his 1909 tract, *Hindus—A Dying Race*.

Yet, with certain exceptions, in the first decade of the twentieth century, "there were not as yet mere appeals for unthinking community solidarity, whipped up through emotive enemy images."[6] *Ideological* support for what we now call communalism arrived only later, in the 1920s and '30s; more common during this period were self-critical responses like that of the early nationalist, Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928), who encouraged Hindus to treat members of the lower classes with more respect. "We do not mind those cases of apostacy [*sic*] from Hinduism where the change of religion results from a change of religious convictions," he said, "But we have every reason to be ashamed of those conversions that are the direct result of our insolence and inhumanities [*sic*] toward the so-called lower classes."[7]

Nevertheless, antagonistic colonial policies (particularly the promise of separate electorates) did spur the development of Hindus Sabhas, first in the Punjab (beginning in 1907), and then later in the United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, the Central Provinces and Berar, and even in the Bombay Presidency. Eventually, many of these regional Hindu Sabhas joined together to inaugurate the All-India Hindu Sabha (better known as the "Hindu Mahasabha") in 1915. Racked by internal tensions between reform-minded Arya Samajis and a more conservative orthodox Hindu faction, the Hindu Sabha movement proved initially rather ineffectual. In the 1920s, however, the Mahasabha would re-emerge as a powerful political force. The immediate cause for the organization's reinvigoration was a series of Hindu-Muslim riots which had resulted from Muslim protests in the context of the Khilafat movement in the 1920s. These riots, which affected even southern India, revitalized the Hindu Mahasabha movement, and made members willing to overcome their internal differences in order to more effectively confront what they perceived to be the Muslim menace, particularly after Swami Shraddhananda, a popular leader within the movement, was assassinated by a Muslim in 1923.[8]

Though the Mahasabhites remained largely focused on Muslims throughout the 1920s, many continued to harbor misgivings about the work of Christian missionaries. A few years after his assassination, Shraddhananda's *Hindu Sangathan: The Saviour of the Dying Race* was published. The text harkened back to Mukherji's assertion (in *Hindus—A Dying Race*) that Hinduism was under siege, and identified both Christians and Muslims, portrayed as members of "foreign" religions with foreign loyalties, as the primary threat.[9] In a particularly direct response to that threat, Shraddhananda advocated a revitalization of the Arya Samaj campaign of *shuddhi* ("purification"—predecessor to today's *ghar wapasi,* or "homecoming" reconversion campaigns) to purify the "untouchables," integrating them more fully into "Hindu" society, while reconverting apostate Hindus.[10]

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4 Joshi, *Fractured Modernity*, 133, 54.

5 Bauman, *Christian Identity*, 76-79; and Zavos, "Conversion," 82.

6 Sarkar, "Conversion and Politics," 1695.

7 Rai, "The Depressed Classes," 243.

8 Jaffrelot, *Reader*, 11-13; Jones, "Politicized Hinduism" and Meadowcroft, "The All-India."

9 Shraddhananda, *Hindu Sangathan*.

10 Jaffrelot, *Reader*, 13-14 and Jaffrelot, "Militant Hindus."

The British establishment of separate electorates had contributed to the impression that Hindu unity was threatened by political dismemberment. At the same time, in the 1920s and 1930s there were a series of significant and well-publicized lower-caste mass conversions to Christianity. Impressed and inspired by these mass movements, missionaries like Donald McGavran and J. Waskom Pickett developed evangelical strategies formulated to provoke them. Among their primary strategies was to concentrate work within the confines of what have come to be known as "people groups," which would encourage castes and sub-castes to convert *en masse*.[11]

McGavran eventually returned to the United States and siphoned a career as a seminary professor from the development of this strategy, which would come to be known as the "Church Growth Movement." The Church Growth model remains an influential one even today, and not only in the United States but also among Indians engaged in missionary work. This is more than a bit ironic, since there never was a mass conversion movement among the Satnamis, the "people group" on whose evangelism McGavran purportedly based his theory.[12] Nevertheless, by openly privileging numbers and the production of mass conversion movements, Church Growth enthusiasts have since the 1930s onward contributed substantially to Hindu concerns about the decline of Hinduism, while providing evidence to support the allegations of those who contend that Christian evangelical concern merely masks more sinister political aspirations (if they did not, critics ask, why would Christians focus on *quantity* over *quality*?).

Spurred on by such concerns, as well as by apprehensions about a potential loss of unity in the struggle for independence, a number of prominent Indian intellectuals began to seek some fundamental, stable, essence of Indian identity that could be used to galvanize Indians and motivate them to fight for their liberation. V.D. Savarkar's 1923 tract, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?,* posited an essential Indian identity based on *Hindutva,* or Hindu-ness. This Hindu-ness was for Savarkar a rather broad, cultural kind of Hindu-ness, but many then and later perceived it, nonetheless, as a religious identity, which had the effect of elevating Hinduism to an essential element of Indian identity.[13] Such an interpretation was not entirely unjustified; after all, Savarkar himself had defined a Hindu as one who declared India both fatherland (*pitribhumi*) and holy land (*punyabhumi*). No Christian or Muslim, of course, could do the latter. Moreover, Savarkar equated *Hindutva* with the triad of "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan." Through Savarkar's work, according to Jaffrelot, "Hindu nationalism appears for the first time as resulting from the superimposition of a religion, a culture, a language, and a sacred territory."[14]

When Savarkar became President of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937, his more radical views became the norm. By the 1930s, the Mahasabha had become a lobby *within* the Indian National Congress (hereafter, "Congress"),[15] oscillating periodically between the Congress's Gandhi-inspired territorial nationalism and Savarkar's *Hindutva*. But as Savarkar's views were coming to predominate within the Mahasabha, Gandhi's were prevailing within the Congress. Accordingly, the two groups grew apart, and the Mahasabha severed its ties with the Congress to become an independent political party.[16]

Meanwhile, the foundations of what has come to be known as the Sangh Parivar were being laid in Central India. Inspired by Savarkar's views, the Maharashtrian Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940) founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. Hedgewar's objective was to propagate the ideology of *Hindutva* while infusing "new physical strength into the majority community."[17] The organization did this largely through the establishment of local branches where young men came to be drilled and instructed, and through an army of *pracharaks* (preachers) of which there were by Independence already 600,000.

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11 Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements.*

12 With a pronounced proclivity for embellishment, McGavran many times implied, counterfactually, that there had been mass movements among the Satnamis. See Bauman, *Christian Identity*, 67, 106-07.

13 Jaffrelot, *Reader*, 15.

14 Ibid., 15. See also, Jones, "Politicized."

15 Formed in 1885, the Indian National Congress was the most important political party in the movement for independence, and became the dominant political party in independent India, holding power, with very few exceptions, for nearly all of the years between Independence and 1998, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (see below) came to control the centre.

16 Meadowcroft, "All-India," 11-12.

17 Jaffrelot, *Reader*, 16.

Until Independence, the influence of the RSS was relatively limited because it had chosen an apolitical stance under both Hedgewar and his successor, M.S. Golwalkar (1906-1973). Yet the RSS did contribute to the diffusion of Savarkar's ideology of *Hindutva*. In 1939, for example, Golwalkar asserted in *We or Our Nation Defined* that minorities, including Christians, should be asked to declare and in effect prove their loyalty to Hinduism through certain symbolic acts of allegiance.[18]

Even Gandhi, whose more irenic conception of Indian nationhood contrasted significantly with that of Savarkar, Shraddhananda, and Golwalkar, became, in the 1930s and '40s, increasingly opposed to the work of Christian missionaries, whose success among lower-caste Hindus threatened to dilute the Hindu voice and vote.[19] Though he spoke approvingly of Christ and of Christian scriptures, as another famous reformer, Rammohan Roy, had done, Gandhi publicly and repeatedly accused Indian converts of being denationalized, and decried Christian missionaries' targeting of the lower castes and classes (whom he called the *"harijans,"* or children of God), which he considered, somewhat controversially, inadequately intelligent to make their own religious decisions.[20] "The poor *Harijans*," he wrote in the journal *Harijan* in 1936, "have no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God and no-God."[21]

Gandhi mainstreamed criticism of Christian evangelical efforts. He was in many ways responsible for raising and popularizing the issue of "allurement," that is, what he considered the illegitimate use of medical and educational services to attract Hindus to Christianity.[22] And he also called conversion *itself* into question. For Gandhi, there was plenty of space within Hinduism for a religious person to pursue the path of religious truth wherever it might lead. "[M]y humble intelligence refuses to believe," he confessed, "that a man becomes good when he renounces one religion and embraces another."[23] Gandhi's views on the topic were typical of Hindus at the time, and remain so today. "None of India's political leaders," writes Sushil Aaron, "encapsulated the anxiety and distaste for the missionary endeavor better than Mahatma Gandhi."[24]

Under British colonial authority, nationalists had no opportunity to draft legislation against conversion. In fact, through the passage of laws such as the 1850 Caste Disabilities Removal Act, the British had attempted to remove obstacles in the way of Christian conversion. Nevertheless, within the princely states, where British rule was more oblique, a number of laws inhibiting conversion and proselytization were passed in the 1930s and '40s, among them the Raigarh State Conversion Act of 1936, the Patna State Freedom of Religion Act of 1942, the Surguja State Apostasy Act of 1945, and the Udaipur State Anti-Conversion Act in 1946.[25] These acts provided models for similar laws proposed at both the state and national level after Independence.

Whatever the contributing factors in the expansion of anti-Christian rhetoric, one manifestation of the shift in public perceptions regarding the Indian Christian community (and Christianity itself) was the emergence and increasing prominence, verve, and moxie of anti-Christian critics. As is clear from the historical overview provided here, rhetorical, even captious resistance to Christianity has a long history in India. Nevertheless, in the late 1980s and '90s, critical voices gained a wider hearing, primarily through publication in popular books, magazines, and journals. In the early '80s, Ram Swarup, founder of the important publishing house, Voice of India, engineered the revitalization of this genre of literature. The late Sita Ram Goel is perhaps the most important of its early contemporary authors, and his *History of*

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18 Ibid., 15-17. On the RSS *pracharaks,* see Kanungo, "The Navigators."

19 Frykenberg, "Introduction," 7-8; and Harper, *In the Shadow*, 292-345.

20 Kim, *In Search*, 33.

21 Ibid.

22 Roberts, "Anti-conversion," 7, 10. Roberts rightfully notes that the "concern with converts' motives was not originally a Hindu preoccupation, but a Christian one, and was nowhere more prominent than amongst Christian missionaries, who were obsessed with the idea that Dalits' motives for converting were always insufficiently pure. But Gandhi did not merely adopt characteristically Christian distinctions between material and genuinely spiritual realities....he radicalized them" (Ibid., 11). Roberts develops this argument more fully in his forthcoming book, *I Am Myself: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging.*

23 *The Collected.*

24 Aaron, *Christianity*, 10.

25 Kim, *In Search*, 38-39.

Hindu-Christian Encounters (1986), *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers?* (1988) and *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Aggression* (1994) were influential publications. Of all such works, newspaper editor and former BJP minister Arun Shourie's censorious *Missionaries in India* (1994) received, perhaps, the most attention (particularly from Christians). Ashok Chowgule's *Christianity in India: The Hindutva Perspective* (1999) openly claimed an anti-Christian critique, as the title implies. In the pages of these and other publications, well-established criticisms of underhanded or overly aggressive evangelizing appear alongside more novel criticisms of Christianity itself as an inherently and inescapably imperialistic and consumptive religion.

The transition to more consistently and publicly hostile Hindu-Christian interactions which began in the late 1980s and accelerated through the 1990s came to fruition in the years 1998 and 1999. The United Christian Forum for Human Rights estimates that there were, between 1964 and 1996, only thirty-two registered cases of communal violence against Christians. In 1997 the rate of violence grew significantly, to fifteen incidents, and then in 1998 the number jumped drastically to ninety.[26]

A large-scale anti-Christian riot also occurred in 1998, in the Dangs, Gujarat, a region dominated by tribal peoples, many of whom had become Christian. There were no deaths in these riots, which began on Christmas day. But over the next few days, dozens of Christian houses and places of worship were vandalized or destroyed. Days later, after surveying the damage on the 10th of January, 1999, BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called for a "national debate on conversion," implying that the violence was motivated (and justified?) by Christian evangelical activities in the region. Just twelve days later, in Orissa, Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young boys were immolated in their jeep by anti-missionary activists in an incident which received considerable international attention and further inflamed the emotions associated with the debate for which Vajpayee had called.[27]

These debates were still live and very much on the public mind when Pope John Paul II visited India in November of 1999. The RSS, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and other similar groups which together comprised the Sangh Parivar ("the family of the Sangh," that is, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) took his visit as an opportunity to press for an apology regarding the atrocities and coerced conversions of the Inquisition at Goa, and also urged the Pope to disavow evangelism aimed at conversion as well as the dogma of salvation only through Christ. The Pope's previous writings suggested that he would never do the latter; his *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) promoted a rather traditional Catholic understanding of salvation and underlined the importance of missions to people of other faiths. However, not only did the Pope *not* apology for the Inquisition, he also chose his visit to India as the occasion to release what, in context, was an inflammatory document: *Ecclesia in Asia*. The document had been drafted during the All Asia Bishops' synod, and in it, the Pope reviews the expansion of Christianity in the first and second millennia, and hopes, rather indelicately, for a "great harvest of faith" in Asia during the third.[28]

Critics of Christian missionizing were predictably incensed, and even many secularists joined in the criticism of what seemed to them an obdurate, insensitive, and conservative performance by the Pope. The traditional understanding of salvation and evangelism expounded in *Ecclesia in Asia* allowed critics of Christianity to make the claim that since the Inquisition, the Catholic church had made only superficial strategic (and no substantial theological) changes to its stance on the status of non-Christian religions. Ultimately, then as now, the critics asserted, the central and acknowledged goal of the Catholic Church was the conversion of all to Christianity.

VHP leader Acharya Giriraj Kishore declared, "It's official. We now know what we are up against. They say that conversions will go on. We say it will not. We have vowed to finish it."[29] The Pope's refusal to apologize for the excesses of the Inquisition also allowed his opponents to continue rhetorically linking the violence of the Inquisition with contemporary evangelical activities, as had already been done a month before the Pope's arrival in an "open letter" to the Pope written by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. In this letter, which will be discussed more fully below, Swami Dayananda provocatively asserted that conversion

26 Aaron, *Christianity*, 47.
27 Kim, *In Search*, 157-59.
28 Ibid., 162.
29 Quoted in Kremmer, "Haunted," 177-78.

was tantamount to violence.[30] The Pope's visit therefore undermined both secularist pleas for tolerance on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, and the ongoing efforts of Indian Catholic leaders, many of whom had been attempting to distance themselves from exclusivist and quasi-exclusivist theologies, to achieve rapprochement with India's Hindu community.[31]

Conversion is Violence

So let us turn, now, to Swami Dayananda and his claims about conversion and violence. Born as Natarajan in Tamil Nadu, Swami Dayananda Saraswati[32] worked for some time as a journalist before getting involved in the Chinmaya Mission of Swami Chinmayananda. He took the vows of a *sannyasi* under Chinmayananda's direction in 1962, and became, over time, a well-known and well-travelled teacher of the Hindu philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Eventually he left the Chinmaya Mission and established his own centers for study from Rishikesh in India (the Arsha Vidya Ashram) to Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, in the United States (the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam). In 2002, he founded the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha (HDAS), which brings together the leaders and heads of more than a hundred Hindu lineages in India to discuss matters of concern to the Hindu society at large (including conversion and the growth of Christianity and Islam). He continues to act as Convenor for the HDAS today. He is a prolific writer and speaker, and commands great respect among certain sectors of the Hindu public, and from many Hindu religious leaders. When he speaks, therefore, he speaks with some authority and would be able to claim that he represents a significant portion of India's Hindus, though the claim would be contested.

Echoing a number of the other critics of Christian evangelical work mentioned in this paper, Swami Dayananda contends that doctrinal assertions and "beliefs" are rationally "non-verifiable," and for this reason no amount of rational disputation could logically lead one to abandon one body of doctrine for another. If no body of doctrine can be shown to be better than another, then there is no justification for conversion.[33]

Lying behind this assertion is surely the broadly shared Hindu assumption, prominently articulated from Gandhi onwards, that "true" religion neither is nor should be about doctrine. Rather, what leads to spiritual success, however that might be defined, is discipline in spiritual practice. All religious traditions prescribe certain kinds of spiritual practices, and all are potentially efficacious, though one will likely have the most success with those embedded in the religious and cultural traditions of one's birth.

Despite the widespread Indian emphasis on religious practice, there are certain doctrinal assumptions that lie beneath Saraswati's rejection of the kinds of interreligious dynamics that would justify religious conversion. It is common, for example, for Hindus to assert that humanity's various gods and goddesses are mere manifestations of a single divine essence. For those who accept such a view, or something like it (such as Gandhi and Dayananda), all religious paths ultimately lead to this divine. If they do, then conversion is unnecessary and even unintelligible, and Dayananda's claim that the religious self should be left undisturbed makes somewhat more sense, as does his claim that conversion (or proselytization) is violence. But for those who reject such a view and contend that only one (or some subset) of these gods and goddesses is real, true, and divine, and the rest illusory or demonic, a contention often accompanied by the assertion that whether one follows the correct god or not will have an immutably positive or negative impact on one's ultimate eternal fate, conversion must remain a possibility, and a right.

Because Dayananda comes out where he does on these debates, for him, while religious traditions cannot be shown through rational disputation to be superior to one another, they remain (and should

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30 Dayananda, "Conversion is Violence." Dayananda would later establish and convene of the influential Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha.

31 Kim, *In Search*, 160-63.

32 This Swami Dayananda Saraswati should not be confused with the similarly named founder of the Arya Samaj.

33 Dayananda, "Conversion is an Act of Violence." See also, Dayananda, "Conversion Is Violence," 10. The text of the address is available as an Ebook at http://bharateeya.wordpress.com/2009/07/15/conversion-is-violence-swami-dayananda/. The page numbers on this and subsequent references follow the Ebook pagination.

remain) intimately related to the cultures of the people from which they emerge. And this, according to Swami Dayananda, is particularly true with Hinduism. For this reason, religious conversion "implies destruction of... culture. The living religious traditions, intimately woven into the fabric of their respective cultures, have to be allowed to live and thrive. Religious conversion should stop—the aggressive religions should realize that they are perpetrating violence when they convert."[34] Evangelism, then, is tantamount to ethnocide.

This view leads naturally to Swami Dayananda's central and most distinctive claim, that is, that the attempt to convert others constitutes an act of violence. What makes it worse, in the case of Hindus converting to Christianity, is that it involves an act of violence committed against people who because of the putatively (and I stress *putatively,* since this also has been contested) non-proselytizing nature of their religion are religiously "unarmed" (*ashastrapaani*).[35] "Thus, conversion is not merely violence against people; it is violence against people who are committed to non-violence," the Swami argues. "In converting, you are also converting the non-violent to violence."[36] And in another context, "Religious conversion destroys centuries-old communities and incites communal violence. It is violence and it breeds violence."[37]

Here, then, is where Swami Dayananda's explanation of violence against Christians blurs, at least indirectly, into a justification for it. "The religious person in every individual is the innermost, inasmuch as he or she is connected to a force beyond the empirical... That is the reason why the hurt caused by religion can turn into violence... When the hurt of the religious becomes acute, it explodes into violence. Conversion is violence. It generates violence... Conversion is, therefore, a rank, one-sided aggression."[38]

The implicit interpretation and justification of violence against Christians as a (legitimate) response to proselytization is nothing new. Earlier, for example, the RSS activist, Shripaty Sastry, had argued threateningly that Christian proselytization was the direct cause of violence against Christian missionaries in India and their predecessors during the Boxer Rebellion in China, and had recommended that India's foreign missionaries should go home, while they still had "sweet memories of India, and before it's too late."[39] These statements are vague and veiled, of course, and it is not my contention that they incite or even provide the pretext for violence. What they do provide, however, is cover, a ready excuse and justification, for those who might, for reasons related to these issues or not, be inclined towards violence against Indian Christians. As Corrigan and Neal have put it, we must consider seriously how verbal threats, intimidation, or justifications of violence can be related symbiotically to violence itself "to create a context in which it becomes plausible (if not acceptable) for some to act [in violent ways] against their perceived enemies."[40]

It is not the implicit explanation and justification of anti-Christian violence that distinguishes Dayananda from his predecessor, then. It is, rather, his view that proselytization itself is a form of violence that represents a new development in the rhetoric of Christianity's critics in India. The figures discussed in the historical paragraphs above, those who expressed concerns about Christian evangelism in the early twentieth century, did so primarily on demographic grounds. While mass movements to Christianity and conversions in time of famine and poverty concerned them, they appear, in general to have been very little concerned with what some, problematically, would come to call "genuine" conversions (that is, conversions for "spiritual" rather than "material" reasons).[41] *Hindutva*-oriented critics of the 1920s and '30s added to this concern the framing of Hinduism as *the* essentially Indian faith, and Christianity, along with Islam, as

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34 Dayananda, "Act of Violence"; see also, Dayananda, "Conversion Is Violence," 18.

35 Dayananda, "Conversion Is Violence," 19-20. For a useful discussion of the claim that Hinduism is non-proselytizing, see Reid B. Locklin, "Sanskritization, (Re-)Conversion, Conquest?: Redescribing Hindu Missions in Contemporary India and North America," (Public address given on 12 May 2011 at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, 2011).

36 Dayananda, "Act of Violence."

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Quoted in Chowgule, *Christianity in India*, 95.

40 Corrigan and Neal, *Religious Intolerance*, 14.

41 I have criticized the distinction between "material" and "spiritual" conversions elsewhere, both for being nearly impossible to discern, and for being laden with a host of prejudices inappropriate to the study of religion. See, for example, Bauman, "Does the Divine."

a threatening foreign faith. With this assertion in mind, and in the context of the broadening enumerative policies, and continuing high-profile mass movements of conversion to Christianity in the 1930s and '40s, many came to view the religious challenge of Christianity as a political challenge as well.

These developments laid the groundwork for Gandhi to complain about the "denationalization" of converts, and to suggest that the missionary emphasis on mass-movement oriented proselytization among low-caste and tribal Indians was the result of a cynical and crass emphasis on numbers (for the presumed benefit of Christian political power). Gandhi and many of those who took up the work of criticizing Christian evangelism in the independent era clearly understood proselytization as a *political* act, and—more to the point—an imperialistic, aggressive one which sometimes proceeded hand in hand with violent political action (as in the Inquisition). Moreover, many of them also complained, with Gandhi, that proselytization could be the cause of communal disharmony, and could even "be a potent *cause* of violent quarrels leading to bloodshed."[42] But Dayananda is the first prominent critic of Christianity to take the additional step of calling proselytization itself an act of violence. As Roberts has argued, it is possible, and useful, to analytically separate the rather straightforward assertion that Christian proselytization has at times benefitted from and been implicated in colonization from the more tendentious claim—one that many scholars implicitly embrace—that proselytization itself is inherently what John and Jean Comaroff have called a "colonization of consciousness."[43] What differentiates Dayananda from many of his predecessors, then, is the way in which he uses this latter claim as the foundation for a generalized critique of proselytization, *by any means*, as violence (i.e., as violent conquest).

Given his assertion that conversion is an act of violence, it should come as no surprise that Swami Dayananda takes umbrage at the state of secularism in India, where the laws, in his view, protect those who commit this violence while preventing the victims from seeking redress. True secularism, and true religious freedom, would protect the victims in this scenario from aggressive intrusions into their religious life:

> Any protest against conversion is always branded as persecution because it is maintained that people are not allowed to practise their religion, that their religious freedom is curbed. The truth is entirely different. The other person also has the freedom to practise his or her religion without interference. That is his/her birthright. Religious freedom does not extend to having a planned programme of conversion.[44]

Religious sentiments must be protected from aggressive intrusions, and if they are not respected, then a truly secular state would intervene, Dayananda claims. "The State has got the responsibility to protect the religious sentiment of all the people. That I consider is secularism."[45]

Analysis

It is surely in part, at least, a rhetorical strategy of the Swami to use the word "violence" to describe the proselytizing of Christian missionaries. Doing so helps neutralize the anti-Hindu critique of those narrowly focused on contemporary acts of physical violence against Indian Christians. But we must also take the Swami at his word, and attempt to understand the argument he is making.

If our definition of violence is a narrow one, focused on acts of physical aggression and displays of physical force by non-legitimate state actors, then the Swami's claims make no sense. Proselytization does not, in the situations of concern to Swami Dayananda, involve this kind of violence. There is no inherent physical harm, or intention to physically harm someone, in proselytization.[46] Nor does it necessarily involve physical coercion, which slightly broader definitions of violence might include. In fact, it doesn't generally even include softer forms of coercion, like allurement through promises of jobs, money, or education.

42 Manshardt, *The Mahatma*, 72. Emphasis added.
43 Roberts, "Is Conversion," 274.
44 Dayananda, "Act of Violence."
45 Dayananda, "Conversion Is Violence," 7.
46 On the necessity of intention in definitions of violence, see Krug et al., *World Report* and Tolan, "Understanding Violence."

Such allurements have always been rare in the work of Christian missionaries in India, and they are even more rare today. That said, there are still occasionally documented incidents of explicit allurement. And many of those who criticize contemporary Christian evangelizing in India become most exercised over the issue of allurement, that is, how Christians either do, or are perceived to use the ostensibly greater access of India's Christians to Western wealth and power, either directly or indirectly, to lure Hindus to the Christian fold.

If this were Swami Dayananda's argument, then we would be inclined to interpret his argument as a suggestion that Christian proselytization is a kind of what Johan Galtung[47] and others have called *structural* or *systemic* violence, because it benefits from certain structural inequities in the global distribution of wealth and power, inequities that favor Christianity in various ways, and which, *inter alia,* facilitate the transfer to India of around a billion dollars annually from western donors for the support of Christian evangelism.[48] And I do think, as Žižek and others have argued, that our tendency to focus on and be more scandalized by acts of *physical* violence (or subjective violence) distracts us from *systemic* or *structural* (that is, objective) forms of violence which are probably radically more damaging, and which may in many cases be productive of the acts of *physical* violence we seek to understand and eliminate. As he is wont to do, Žižek puts it provocatively:

> Opposing all forms of violence, from direct, physical violence (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, incitement, sexual discrimination), seems to be the main preoccupation of the tolerant liberal attitude that predominates today. An SOS call sustains such talk, drowning out all other approaches: everything else can and has to wait... Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence—that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn't it desperately try to distract our attention form the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them?[49]

But this, in fact, is not Swami Dayananda's argument. He does not, in the works I've quoted here, criticize Christian evangelists for deploying, or benefitting indirectly from global inequities of wealth and power. Rather, he criticizes proselytization, as I've put it, for being a form of *ethnocide*. To quote him again: "[C]onversion implies destruction of... culture. The living religious traditions, intimately woven into the fabric of their respective cultures, have to be allowed to live and thrive. Religious conversion should stop— the aggressive religions should realize that they are perpetrating violence when they convert."[50]

There are several significant assumptions that lie behind this statement that need to be highlighted. First, "living religious traditions" are "intimately woven into the fabric of their respective cultures," with the implied assertion that these cultures into which they are intimately woven would collapse without them. It is certainly the case that religion and culture are related closely, a fact recognized by modern social scientists from Weber and Durkheim onward. To suggest, however, that cultures are fully dependent upon their religions and collapse without them is to take a further step, one which perhaps makes more sense in a context with more linguistic and hermeneutical slippage between the terms "religion" and "culture" than one generally finds in the post-Enlightenment West (where "religion" is generally considered more private and portable).

The second assumption embedded in this statement is that religions, because of their relation to culture, "have to be allowed to live and thrive." This also, is a rather controversial stance, since it implies

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47 Galtung, "Violence."

48 It is uncertain how much Sangh Parivar organizations receive from abroad. None of the largest and best-known are listed in the data made available by the Indian government through the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, 2010. But this data includes only the largest recipients of foreign donations. It is possible that Sangh organizations are not among them, or that they receive donations funneled through organizations by other names, or that they do not properly report the contributions they receive from abroad (many organizations do not). But it is also of course possible that they receive very little, since the largest number of their supporters are of course in India itself. For a longer discussion of what can be known from this data, see Bauman, *Pentecostals,* 143-54.

49 Žižek, *Violence*, 10-11.

50 Dayananda, "Act of Violence"; see also, Dayananda, "Conversion Is Violence," 18.

that religions themselves (as opposed to those who adhere to them) have rights like those of humans, to life and liberty. And the third assumption, then, probably the most problematic from a scholarly point of view, is that cultures are static, definable things that live and die (as opposed to merely mutating and developing).

It is clear, in the end, that the violence of which the Swami accuses proselytizers is a *cultural* violence. It is important to clarify what I mean by "cultural violence" in the case of Swami Dayananda, because "cultural violence" is also a term used by Johan Galtung. For Galtung, "cultural violence" is "... any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form."[51] But Swami Dayananda is not really accusing Christian proselytizers of this crime. Rather, he is accusing them of attempting (successfully, to some extent) to destroy a particular culture.

This, then, is the crux of the matter. To consider it fairly, we must leave unquestioned for the moment the Swami's problematic elision of religion and culture. If religion = culture, then according to Swami Dayananda, proselytization (which is, again, the attempt to convert another) is an attempt to destroy a culture. On what grounds might we consider this a form of violence? On the one hand, in the broader definitions of violence espoused by sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers (as opposed to the more narrow ones more regularly employed by political scientists),[52] the attempt to damage culture is often spoken of, rhetorically, as a kind of violence, a way of speaking that emerges out of the desire to preserve threatened peoples and their traditions. On the other hand, we attempt to change each other's culture, or at least certain aspects of it, all the time. Most of us who teach in colleges are engaged in a struggle to eradicate "rape culture," for example, which is, quite tragically, very much a part of American culture, one which manifests itself in a particularly concentrated form on our campuses. Or we attempt to resist the growing influence of "corporate culture" in our universities. And Swami Dayananda himself is of course trying to change the Christian "culture of conversion."

Moreover, the notion that conversion implies a loss of culture implicitly assumes, problematically, that cultures are static, and accepts without critical consideration Dayananda's elision of religion and culture. As Nathaniel Roberts has suggested, in the real-world interreligious dynamics of the Indian slums he studied, none of the Pentecostal Christians he had studied had...

> ...ever expressed the view that becoming Christian required them to exchange one set of self-defining values for another. While many credited Christ with helping them to give up their craving for alcohol, for example, or their hot-temperedness, they described these as undesirable traits that did not accord with what they wanted for themselves. They certainly did not see Christianity as having undermined anything essential to their former, preconversion selves. Nor, significantly, did their slum-dwelling Hindu friends and neighbors regard their conversion to Christianity as such... They merely doubted the *verity* of Christian truth claims.[53]

It is only in the ideology of *Hindutva,* Roberts claims, and particularly in the rhetoric of Dayananda, that the putative unverifiability of religious truth claims, and the ostensible identity of religion and culture, becomes a pretense for the portrayal of conversion, and the attempt to convert, as an act of cultural imperialism.

We have reason to be concerned about the loss of traditions, whether they are cultural or religious. Moreover, depending on one's perspective, the implicit or explicit criticism of non-Christian religious traditions that accompanies proselytization could be considered defamation, which is understood to be a kind of violence by scholars like Garver.[54] And it certainly includes the potential to incur emotional or mental damage on the individual, an aspect of "destructive harm" that defines violence according to E.V. Walter.[55]

But whether the attempt to change another's religion or culture through means of persuasion is an act of violence is another question. Most of the authors just cited would exclude rational disputation and

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51 Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 291. For a discussion of this and other scholarly definitions of religion, see Mider, "The Anatomy," 705.
52 On which, see Mider, "The Anatomy," 705.
53 Roberts, "Is Conversion," 279-80.
54 Garver, "What Violence Is."
55 Walter, *Terror and Resistance.* I am dependent, in my characterization of Walter, on Mider, "The Anatomy of Violence," 705.

persuasion from their definitions of violence. And many others would explicitly exclude defamation and hate speech, since in such cases the principle of freedom of speech collides with the principle of protecting individuals from harm.[56] Perhaps Swami Dayananda might argue that "mere persuasion" is never merely that because Christian proselytization enjoys support from systemic forms of violence, that is, from global inequities of wealth and power that provide substantial financial support for Christian evangelism and that give Christianity itself a certain mildly aphrodisiacal modern cachet.

Though I might myself agree if Swami Dayananda were to make that argument, in my view, the basis of his claims about proselytization and violence lies elsewhere, that is, in his claim that "The religious person in every individual is the innermost," and as such, deserves special protection. This is a claim that scholars working from a secular perspective should probably interrogate more regularly than they do. Why, for example, should a person's religious perspective be given any more consideration than their scientific or political perspective is given in law? Why do those who think it should be illegal to convert another religiously not object to the attempt to convert another politically? Why is acceptance of western technologies that have proven useful to Indians not criticized as a kind of violence when the acceptance of religious "technologies" that have proven useful to Indians is? The distinction between religion and politics, or between religion and technology, while often assumed, is not self-evident or intuitive. Rather, it is indicative of a self-interested, emic religious position that seeks a special status for religion because of what is presumed to be the special nature (i.e., *super*natural) focus of its attention. Why so many scholars of religion working from an etic perspective should accept this position is less clear.

What these questions and issues lay bare is the fact that in this case, at least, the appeal that special sensitivity, respect, and consideration be shown toward religion as the "innermost" aspect of any person, an aspect more likely than the political self or the technological self to feel threatened, to be offended, and to respond violently to provocation, rests upon and shrouds a particular disciplinary discourse of religion *as* culture that is deployed normatively for the very purpose of protecting an Indian culture of which Hinduism is deemed an essential and intricate part, despite the fact that many Indians would themselves reject the view.

Conclusion

In the end, it is clear that the legitimacy of the claim that proselytization is a kind of violence depends not only on one's definition of "violence," but also, importantly, on one's definition of "religion." William Cavanaugh, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, S.N. Balagangadhara, Tomoko Masuzawa, Timothy Fitzgerald, and others have persuasively demonstrated not only that the definition of "religion" differs transhistorically and transculturally, but also that these definitions do not arise "organically" from observation, but are rather contingent, that is, the result of arrangements of power that shift from time to time and differ from place to place. Moreover, these disparate definitions of "religion" are in every place and time *normative,* and have the effect of legitimizing certain kinds of religious belief and disciplining certain kinds of religious behavior, while marginalizing, undermining, and eradicating "aberrant" religious beliefs and behaviors.[57]

For Dayananda, the assertion that religion and culture are "intertwined" and that, therefore, "Destruction of religion is destruction of culture"[58] rests upon a contingent definition of religion, one which asserts that religions are and should be ethnic, not universal, and that stands in opposition to the equally contingent but dominant Western view of religion as something portable, exorcisable from culture, and therefore *indigenizable* in any culture, the very view that animates the Christian impulse towards proselytization. I have argued elsewhere that Hindu-Christian conflict in contemporary India is "religious" only in the limited sense that it does involve a debate about what religion is and should be, a debate which leads many Hindus

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56 Mider, "The Anatomy of Violence," 705.
57 See, for example, Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Cavanaugh, *The Myth*; Fitzgerald, *The Ideology*; J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*; W.C. Smith, *The Meaning*; Balagangadhara, *The "Heathen in His Blindness..."*; and Masuzawa, *The Invention*.
58 Dayananda, "Conversion Is Violence," 17.

to question the value and legitimacy of conversion, and many Christians (and Westerners influenced by Christianity in their thinking about religion) to presume it. And that debate certainly clouds the ability of Western scholars to appraise the argument that Swami Dayananda is making about proselytism and violence. For some western scholars, an inability to think beyond the normative western definitions of religion makes it difficult even to hear and properly understand the Swami's argument. For others, an acknowledgement of the contingent nature of definitions of religion leads to an unwillingness to take sides or otherwise intervene it what appears an inexorable impasse between culturally specific and counterpoised ways of knowing and behaving religiously.

What frequently gets lost in the debate, however, is the existence, within India (and elsewhere, of course), of other, competing disciplinary discourses of religion, such as those articulated by the low-caste Pentecostal slum-dwellers of Chennai and Mumbai (and their neighbors), interviewed by Nathaniel Roberts. For Roberts's interlocutors, religion was not inextricably tied to culture, but was, rather, a kind of technology deemed useful by some and not useful by others.[59] Perhaps more to the point is the longstanding existence, in India, of a discourse of legitimate religion best typified by the famous low-caste leader, B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), a discourse in which religion was understood as a tool for the achievement, and guarantor, of social equality.[60] Keeping this in mind, it becomes clear that Dayananda's disciplinary discourse of religion is intended not only to counter the proselytizing of evangelistic Christians, but also to delegitimize the religious beliefs and behaviors of Hindus (particularly low-caste Hindus) who, deploying their own definitions of legitimate religion, convert to Christianity or other "foreign" faiths. Seen in this light, Dayananda's critique of Christian proselytization becomes somewhat more problematic, because it resists the expansion of one form of normative religious discourse while simultaneously attempting to impose another.

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59 Roberts, "Is Conversion," 278-79.
60 See, for example, Queen, "Dr. Ambedkar."

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