

Don't Call it Proselytism

By Lawrence A. Uzzell
(*First Things*, October 2004)

Comment: This article has many lessons for "World Orthodoxy".

Several years ago, during an interview I was conducting with him on church-state relations, an adviser to a provincial governor in Siberia asked me suspiciously if I believed in "proselytism." I replied that I not only believed in it but actually practiced it, having sponsored several American converts to Orthodox Christianity from Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. From his surprise at my admitting I was a proselytizer, it was clear that he had never before heard the word used except as a term of abuse.

The word "proselytism," which derives from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, is now used more often in more languages than ever before in its history. Its connotation is almost always negative, even sinister. One cannot imagine a missionary organization today describing its own activities as "proselytism," though the original meaning of the term "proselyte" was positive. In the Septuagint and the New Testament it referred to Gentile converts to Judaism, such as those who were among the witnesses to the miracle at Pentecost (Acts 2:11). According to Acts 6:5 a certain "Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch," became one the Church's first deacons; he thus presumably converted twice, first from paganism to Judaism and then from Judaism to Christianity. (If he were our contemporary, would he be considered a double victim of religious fanaticism?)

We live in an age of persuasion, in which we are bombarded by political and commercial messages designed to change our thoughts and actions, but the unfavorable term "proselytism" is reserved for specifically religious persuaders. Phrases such as "feminist proselytism" or "environmentalist proselytism" are unknown; it is considered natural, even laudable, for adherents of those secular belief systems to seek converts all over the world, even in cultures where their beliefs are profoundly alien.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term had broader application. In 1790 Edmund Burke applied it to the anti-Christian *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment, who he said "were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree." The 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary defined "proselytism" as "the making of converts to a religion or religious sect, or to any opinion, system, or party." The high-church Anglican Edward Pusey expressed regret in 1842 that "any exhibition of ourselves as a proselytizing Church would unsettle many of our own children,"

Today's Christian missionaries often contrast "proselytism" with "evangelism"; the former is what they accuse rival denominations of doing, while the latter is what they claim to do themselves. Surprisingly, there is no rigorous distinction between the two terms in canon law or in theological dictionaries — or for that matter in legal dictionaries. The Greek Constitution, for example, has outlawed "proselytism" since 1911 without ever defining it. The term is sometimes used to denounce Christian "sheep stealers" who seek converts among those who are already members of some other Christian confession, as distinct from missionaries who appeal to those who have never been baptized — but no Church council or other authoritative religious organ has ever formalized that usage.

As with "fascism" in the 1960s and "terrorism" today, the definition of "proselytism" seems to grow less and less precise the more often the word is used. Sometimes it is vaguely characterized as the use of inappropriate methods, one of which is said to be vigorous criticism of the belief system from which the target of proselytism is being wooed. Again, that standard is almost never applied to secular ideologies. Imagine trying to persuade someone of the merits of free-market capitalism without discussing the defects of socialism, or vice versa. Bribery, fraud, and coercion are also frequently mentioned as accompaniments of proselytism (though presumably these are wrong in and of themselves, whether or not they accompany missionary activity).

Consider the following examples. In 1961 the World Council of Churches pronounced "proselytism" to be "a corruption of Christian witness" that uses "cajolery, bribery, undue pressure, or intimidation, subtly or openly, to bring about seeming conversion." In a foot-note to the documents of Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church defined proselytism as "a corruption of the Christian witness by appeal to hidden forms of coercion or by a style of propaganda unworthy of the Gospel. It is not the use but the abuse of the right to religious freedom," Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, wrote in 1998 that by "proselytism" he meant "the use of unworthy means to attract members of other churches or even unchurched persons to their fold. Misrepresentation of the other, or of one's own community, is a common source of tension. Some of the tension between churches comes from the way in which new converts to one community denigrate their former ecclesial home." A statement from

the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 2003 defined "coercive proselytism" as that which "violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters."

That last statement in particular has more than a hint of disingenuousness about it: Can one imagine the National Council of Churches supporting *non*-coercive proselytism? The word "coercive" seems to have been added not to help make precise distinctions, but rather as a rhetorical flourish to help further discredit activities that the NCC already disapproves of. On this subject as on so many others, the NCC has chosen fuzziness over clarity.

From my fellow Orthodox Christians, such willful fuzziness often appears in terms such as "canonical territory," which imply that other Christian confessions should treat as off-limits large geographical areas in which it is claimed, only one faith has deep roots and historical legitimacy. With demographic mixing (which has been going on in most countries much longer than ultra-nationalists are willing to admit), such demarcations inexorably come to be drawn along ethnic rather than geographical lines. In effect, today's Moscow Patriarchate is arguing that if you are an ethnic Pole living in Russia you should be Roman Catholic, if you are an Uzbek you should be Muslim, and so on — contradicting the New Testament teaching (Galatians 3:28) that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek" The Patriarchate has thus turned its back on its own rich heritage of missionary service among the Muslims of Central Asia and the aboriginal pagans of Siberia and Alaska. In an age of globalization, renouncing the right to evangelize foreigners ultimately means renouncing the right to evangelize our next-door neighbors and even our own grandchildren.

Secular specialists on human rights and international law, even those who defend freedom of conscience, now use the word "proselytism" to mean any attempt by any religious believer to win converts from other religions or from irreligion. The term appears repeatedly in the U.S. State Department's annual country reports on international religious freedom. Intentionally or not, this usage gives to all missionary activities a color of fanatical sectarianism.

Pushing actively for the denigration of proselytism are two different forces, which overlap in organizations such as the NCC. Lukewarm relativists constitute the first of these forces. Their need is for psychological defenses and social barriers against those who would vigorously advocate eternal truths. The bureaucratic, corporate, and academic elites who set the rules of public discussion in Western Europe and North America are uncomfortable with ultimate questions and with theological answers to those questions. They wish to avoid not only answering such questions but even hearing them asked. If possible they would like to do with the whole of society what they have already done to the public school systems: turn it into a "religion-free zone" undisturbed by prophets and saints or even by the memory of them. Along with other new rules this means a new etiquette, in which religious believers must scrupulously refrain from "offending" unbelievers (though there is no reciprocal obligation for unbelievers to refrain from what used to be called blasphemy). In effect the relativists seek selective protectionism in the marketplace of ideas, while continuing to depict themselves as defenders of robust intellectual freedom.

The other force pushing to discredit a broad range of activities related to proselytism is made up of those religious leaders who fear that their organizations could not effectively compete with others. Among these are the Protestant bodies that have hitched their fate to fading ideologies such as twentieth-century secular liberalism, as well as those Orthodox churches that have allowed themselves to function primarily as ethnic clubs. Even while Orthodox Christianity is making unprecedented progress among ex-Protestants in the American Bible Belt, Orthodox bishops in Moscow continue to rely on the patronage of the authoritarian Russian government.

The world's largest and most complicated religious organization, the Roman Catholic Church, is rugged in several directions. On the issue of proselytism, Roman Catholics should have less in common with the dwindling Protestant mainline than with evangelical Protestants, who really believe in the objective truth of their own faith and in their mission to preach it universally. But in much of Western Europe, Roman Catholics have more in common with today's Orthodox nationalists, lured by the same self-defeating temptation to exclude novel religions not because they are false but because they are foreign. Like the Orthodox, they risk losing opportunities to win new converts because they put their energies into suppressing persuasion rather than into being more persuasive.

On the most important theological issues, including ecclesiology, Roman Catholics are genuinely closer to the Orthodox than to Protestants. Pope John Paul II's model of a Church that must breathe with "two lungs" provides a principled basis for the Vatican to renounce "sheep stealing" from the Orthodox —

but even that model should be seen as a matter of ecclesiastical policy and not of secular law. To encourage the legislators and bureaucrats of today's highly secularized governments, even in nominally Orthodox countries, to enforce prohibitions on proselytism is to invite them into matters that they are ludicrously ill-equipped to judge and to encourage even more dangerous meddling in other areas of church life.

Another group that is bound to be unhappy about proselytism is the Jews — both the religiously observant and the nonobservant. Like it or not, on this point Jews and Christians face a fundamental disagreement on first principles. We Christians are commanded (Matthew 28:19) to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Judaism, by contrast, has evolved into a culture that generally rejects all missionary appeals of any kind to other ethnicities. (That this was not always so is shown by the very origins of the term "proselyte.") Mainstream Jewish law insists on a positive duty to discourage Gentiles who want to become Jews and denies that it is even possible for an ethnic Jew to convert out of Judaism. In this as in other areas, Jews would feel more comfortable if we behaved like them — if we abandoned all efforts to win new Christian converts, except perhaps among traditionally Christian ethnicities. But for us the very phrase "Christian ethnicity" is problematic; we do not believe that faith is transmitted by genes. The Jews are so unusual, even unique, among the major world religions in this respect that it seems absurd for the rest of us to be guided by their rules.

Proselytism has become the world's most overused religious term and is most often invoked by those who ultimately oppose all forms of Christian evangelism. If the Apostles had refrained from everything that today is lumped under the term, there would have been no carrying out of the Great Commission and the Church might have died in its infancy. Precisely because it labels all missionary activity pejoratively, the term ? as it is used today ? is no help in distinguishing the legitimate from the illegitimate; it makes no distinction between, say, St. Paul and those missionaries who use such unscrupulous tactics, for example, requiring that desperately poor Russians sit through Protestant worship services before free meals are provided to them. (Sadly, I am not making that up.)

The Adventist scholar Bert Beach persuasively argues that this "equivocal term, rife with misapplications" should be dropped in favor of the term "improper evangelism." In an essay posted on the web-site of the International Religious Liberty Association (www.irla.org), Beach proposes a voluntary good-conduct code to guide missionaries in "principles of proper dissemination of religion and belief." His suggested principles may seem self-evident, but I have seen almost *every* one of them violated by foreigners seeking converts in Russia. He offers a list of things that a missionary will not do. "Not exploit or take advantage of poor, vulnerable segments of the population. Not knowingly make false or questionable claims of miraculous healings or interventions: Not offer financial or other material inducements or educational benefits in order to 'convert' people. Not knowingly spread false information regarding the teachings of other religions or ridiculing their beliefs and practices. Not incite hatred, internecine strife, and antagonistic competition. Not use coercive or manipulative methods of evangelism to get church members, including certain advertising that preys on human gullibility".

If Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics have been too eager to embrace state coercion as an antidote to improper evangelism, many Protestants have been insufficiently zealous about monitoring one another for fraudulent or otherwise improper methods. Those who are serious about Christian missions should work not only to develop their own specialized code of ethics but to name and shame its violators: "That would make it easier to retire the hopelessly inflated term "proselytism" to the linguistic museum where it belongs.

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Editor's Note: Rather than drop the term "proselytism" (as author Uzzell suggests), since it's a good Scriptural word (at least, in the Septuagint Old Testament), the so-called "World Orthodox" should drop their medieval "state coercion" in the attempt to force their ethnic, "Russian", or "Greek", or "Bulgarian", or "Georgian", or whatever, type of neo-Orthodoxy down their peoples' throats. These tactics are worthy of their Communist or Fascist predecessors.