

# Editorial

## EVANGELISTIC ETHICS IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The relationship of evangelism, defined as verbal proclamation of the Gospel and invitation to personal faith in Christ, to socio-political issues has received increasing attention in the past two decades. Ethical assessments of the methods and results of evangelistic activity have been rare among evangelicals. The ethical problems faced by some televangelists in the U.S. highlight the need to reflect on this area. This issue begins a process.

In contexts of religious pluralism like India, evangelistic activity is often seen as persuading people to change their religious affiliation. Evangelism is also considered morally suspect. Mahatma Gandhi expressed a high regard for the teachings of Christianity and the person of Jesus. He was vehemently opposed to evangelism which he termed a proselytising activity. He sacrificed his life for granting freedom, justice and equality to the oppressed and untouchable castes/classes of India but was unwilling to concede them the freedom to change their religion. This was a key issue between Gandhi and Bishop Azariah, founder of the first indigenous missionary society in India.

In nearly all Islamic societies, evangelistic activity is illegal. The sharing of the Gospel with Muslims is forbidden and conversion to another religion (except Islam) is outlawed.

### THE INTEGRITY OF THE HEARER

How can the integrity of the religious experience of such a recipient be maintained while sharing the Gospel?

In the context of India, Christians committed to evangelism face ethical challenges in two areas. In the area of methods of evangelism, we are challenged to promote activities which respect the integrity of the hearer. The recipient is often a person devoutly committed to another faith. How can the integrity of the religious experience of such a recipient be maintained while sharing the Gospel and extending an invitation to faith in Christ? The Gospel does make a judgment on all religious experiences outside of Christ. It is here that an Indian evangelist finds it difficult to uphold the integrity of the Gospel as well as that of the hearer who belongs to another religion.

### THE INTEGRITY OF THE NATION

How can evangelism contribute to national integrity instead of being viewed as a threat to it?

The context of religious pluralism challenges the evangelist to justify the legitimacy of a call to conversion. An integral part of its identity which India promotes and develops is religious plurality. A good Indian shows religious tolerance. It is defined in traditional Hindu terms as a pluralistic attitude to religions. All religions are regarded as having the same validity, so efforts to "convert" people to another religion are interpreted rather as turning them from their own religion, tradition and roots. Instead, the plea is made that efforts should be directed at enabling people to find salvation within their own religious traditions. Therefore, evangelistic efforts are sometimes viewed as an attack on the emerging identity of a religiously plural nation. The Christian contribution to the socio-economic welfare of the poor is welcomed and even admired, but Christian evangelistic efforts are suspect. This has caused some Christians to abandon evangelism. How can evangelism contribute to national integrity instead of being viewed as a threat to it?

Ethical questions are also raised about the manner in which the results of evangelistic work are publicised. In some contexts the Church is very dependent on overseas financial support for its evangelistic work. The need to satisfy the donors' requirements places enormous pressure on the way the outcome of evangelism is shared. Hence financial dependency may occasionally lead to the adoption of inappropriate methods of evangelism - promoted by some overseas donors.

It is clear that further reflection is necessary in order for evangelistic activity to illustrate, rather than betray, the Gospel.

This issue of *Transformation* is devoted to some aspects of the reflection that is needed. Robert Coote and Ralph Winter debate the criteria by which evangelism and its results are measured, and the uses to which the resulting statistics are put in motivating Christians to evangelism. Bryan Gilling and David Jones debate the issues that were raised in particular with reference to Luis Palau's

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