

Unaggressive evangelism

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

A few months ago I gave a lecture at a small Midwestern college. Broadly put, my topic was the encounter with “the other.” In a discussion afterwards, a student suggested that engaging in evangelism and seeking to convert another person to the Christian faith is a form of violence, a form of harmful disrespect for the other. Although this opinion is prevalent in certain academic and religious circles, I had not expected it to have traveled so far, culturally speaking. After all, the college where I was speaking was a flagship institution of a denomination known for its evangelistic and missionary efforts.

It should be undisputed that some forms of evangelism are violent. This holds true for conversions extracted at the point of the sword, a method that brought large parts of Europe into the fold of the church. Less violent but still clearly objectionable are all manipulative methods practiced by overzealous evangelists, be they those who come knocking at our doors or some of those whose faces we see on TV screens. The relevant question is not whether evangelism *can* be violent; it has been and sometimes is still violent. The question is rather whether evangelism is *inherently* violent.

I posed this last question to a good friend who has engaged in cross-cultural evangelism for years as he works among the so-called “unreached peoples.” “What do you think of this objection to your work?” I teased him. “Can you sleep peacefully at night after perpetrating so much violence?” Three things in his response seem particularly significant.

“First,” he said, “it all depends how one understands evangelism. I never saw myself endeavoring to convert anyone. God converts. I witness. The main task as a witness is to help people acquire an accurate understanding of the Christian faith. If they reject it, they should not be rejecting its caricatures; if they embrace it, they should know what they are embracing.”

“Do you mean that it is wrong to try to persuade people that they ought to embrace the Christian faith? Or do you think it is wrong to somehow seek to make them, in

your case, follow Christ?" I asked.

"The latter. If you don't manipulate, persuasion is legitimate, but not effective. I found it best simply to keep removing obstacles and let God nudge people to embark upon the Christian journey. If they understand what the Christian faith is about and still want to reject it, that's their perfect right."

The second point my friend made underscored that seeking to *persuade* as well as to inform someone of the truth of your religious beliefs, though possibly ineffective, is not inherently violent. "I was more often the evangelized than the evangelizer. The people with whom I lived were very religious. They sought to convince me to follow their religious path. But I did not feel at all violated by their efforts."

"That's interesting," I responded. "Let me venture a guess. For them and for you, religions are not just a matter of different lifestyles, something vaguely analogous to a preference for one ethnic dish over another. Rather, religions make truth claims about what constitutes the good life. So if a Muslim is trying to persuade you to embrace Islam, he is not so much meddling in your private affairs as honoring you as a person to whom truth matters. If he had no desire for you to become a Muslim, you could rightly protest that he was either indifferent to your well-being or to his own faith."

"Yes, although one may still, for other reasons, prefer not to seek to persuade the other of the truth of Islam or Christianity, but simply to offer accurate information. And when it comes to offering such information," my friend said, "there is a third point to make. That's the question of rights. Every person has the right to accurate information about another religion. A person may not claim that right because she doesn't care, but if she does, she has the right to be informed. The only adequate way to inform her about religious beliefs and practices is through representatives of that other religion."

"You mean this as a positive right, like the right to work for the unemployed, the right to social help for the poor?"

"Yes. The UN Declaration on Human Rights mentions negative rights, which secure a sphere of freedom, as well as positive rights, which secure essential goods."

"I might easily agree with you that there are such things as positive rights," I responded. "I am just not sure that accurate information about other religions is

such a right.”

We went on to debate the distinction between negative and positive rights, the role of the state in each case, and how such rights apply to information about religions. The upshot was that we disagreed. I would grant only that those who are interested in another religion have the right to seek that information and that those who want to provide it have the right to give it. He, on the other hand, insisted on the recipients’ positive right to have such information made available to them.

But whether one agrees with my friend’s stronger or my weaker application of human rights to the issue, the consequences for the student’s question are significant. Those providing information about another religious path and persuading seekers of its truth are not violent—provided they agree that actually changing people’s allegiances is God’s task and not theirs. Those who are violent want to hinder people from offering and accessing adequate information about other religious paths and questioning the truth of those paths.