In December 2002, George Bush established through an executive order after having failed to do so legislatively the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).1 This initiative allows the US government to more easily fund faith-based organizations for their work in developing countries, including relief and humanitarian efforts. Today 25% of USAID partners are faith based organizations and 385 million dollars has been set aside in the 2005 US budget for faith-based and community initiatives.2 The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's (NCRP) report "Funding the Culture Wars: Philanthropy, Church and State" found that almost all the organizations funded under the Faith-Based initiative had as part of their mission three elements: "personal salvation, biblical infallibility and a commitment to religious proselytizing".3

The Faith-Based initiative launched by the US president raises concerns about government's alliance with and sponsorship of Christian values and missionaries. It also lends credibility to the critics who attest that the war on terrorism is really a religious crusade. Moreover, it also raises a critical question for civil society actors, States and the public in general: Should faith-based organizations be allowed to proselytize while providing development and humanitarian aid?

After the war in Iraq and again in the wake of the tsunami, Christian aid organizations were among the first to set-up relief operations in devastated countries. Many described the faith-based organizations lining up at the Iraq-Jordan border as a second army, preparing to fight a "battle for the souls"5 of Iraqi people. Although the media may have added to the stereotype of bible thumping missionaries,6 the modus operandi of some Christian aid workers has prompted Christian and non-Christian groups alike to condemn hard-lined evangelism. Aggressive proselytizing by Christian Missionaries in Sri Lanka, Iraq and Indonesia has provided fundamentalist forces within these countries a 'justification' for their backlash, and in some cases has fueled violence against native Christian populations.

At the centre of this storm is Reverend Franklin Graham, the head of Samaritan's Purse, a faith-based organization which has received more than 13 million in US government funds. With a total annual budget of over 220 million ($US) Samaritan's Purse is active in about 100 countries worldwide including providing emergency aid in places like Indonesia, Iraq and Sri Lanka. The self acknowledged mission of Samaritan's Purse is to help those in need "with the purpose of sharing God's love through His Son, Jesus Christ."7 Graham, a second generation evangelist and right-wing fundamentalist, has been publicly disparaging about Islam calling it a "wicked religion" and has also said that Hindus are 'bound by Satan's Power.'

Samaritan's Purse is not new to such controversy and has a history of aggressive proselytization. In 2003 their Operation Christmas Child program came under scrutiny for delivering shoeboxes filled with presents and evangelical literature to children in developing countries. During the 1991 Gulf War, the organization shipped Arabic copies of the New Testament into Saudi Arabia, not only breaking Saudi law but also defying the US-Saudi alliance. After an earthquake in rural El-Salvador, the agency insisted on holding prayer sessions before helping and teaching residents to build emergency shelters.

Samaritan's Purse is not the only organization which has used the desperation of communities after wars and environmental disasters as a platform to proselytize. In reaction to the tsunami in Asia, K.P Yohannan, President for the Gospel For Asia, a Texas based group was quoted as saying "This [disaster i.e the tsunami] is one of the
greatest opportunities God has given us to share his love with people." Yet another organization mixing aggressive religious messages and relief aid is the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which had 800 volunteers deliver food packages to Iraq labeled with "grace and truth were realized through Jesus" (a verse from St. John's Gospel) in Arabic. According to Albert Mohler of the SBC, the God of Islam and the salvation it offers is false and "The Christian has to look at Iraq and see persons desperately in need of the gospel..."

Although the comments of Graham and Mohler can be dismissed as hate mongering and the sentiments of a few, the fact is both these individuals and organizations are not exactly on the outskirts of American society. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the largest Protestant denomination in the US; and Mohler, the president of the nationwide network of SBC seminaries, is recognized as a "reigning intellectual of the evangelical movement" and was listed by the Time Magazine as one of its "50 for the Future". Franklin Graham has a close personal relationship with George Bush and was invited to deliver prayers at his presidential inauguration and the Easter sermon at the Pentagon.

Earlier this year in Indonesia, World Help another US based missionary group, planned to airlift orphans from the province of Banda Aceh, a stronghold of conservative Islam, and resettle them in a Christian children's home in Jakarta. Before the Indonesian government stepped in and put an end to their plans, the fundraising appeal on World Help's website stated the need to "plant Christian principles as early as possible" in the Muslim children.

In their defense, World Help drew a parallel with their work and that of Mother Teresa, who placed Hindu orphans in Catholic children's homes in Calcutta and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. However, they failed to point out significant differences. Mother Teresa was not a short term missionary who flew into the country, relocated the children and then left. While Mother Teresa has also been accused of having an ulterior motive, i.e. religious conversion, she was not viewed as an outsider who had little understanding of the country's culture. She adopted India as her home and lived there for nearly 70 years, was sensitive to its religions and cultures, and was accepted and trusted by the people she worked with. In 1980 she was accorded the nation's highest civilian honor, the Jewel of India award, and on her death was acknowledged to be the most famous Indian citizen.

The fact that most of the organizations mixing aid and religion are US based, no doubt inflames passions further particularly in Muslim countries. It is estimated that one out of every two missionaries is an American, and one out of three is an evangelist.

Even the Church of Scientology is part of what has become known as the God Squad. Working in Banda Aceh, the severest hit region by the tsunami, under pitched tents and a banner that reads "Penanganan," (meaning trauma centre), volunteer ministers provide grief counseling to the villagers. This includes administering back massages they call "nerve assist", and the teachings of L.Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology. Although the group says that it is not looking to convert, a website associated with the Church appealed for funds to print and distribute copies of Hubbard's writings in tsunami affected areas.

Along with other religious denominations seeking converts, militant Islamic organizations have also seized this as an opportunity to recruit. The Islamic Defenders Front, a group known for attacking bars in Jakarta during the month of Ramadan, sent 3,000 members to Banda Aceh to work with displaced people and provide spiritual guidance. According to Hilmy Bakar Almacaty "We are training people to be members of Islamic Defenders...I think Aceh is welcoming to that idea." Laskar Mujahideen, a group explicitly and inextricably linked to Al-Qaeda, sent a team of 250 people to Banda Aceh, some of whom were transported by the Indonesian military. They established posts outside the airport and near the camps of relief organizations with a sign - rather a warning - reading "Islamic Law Enforcement".

Many faith-based organizations providing humanitarian aid condemn such proselytization, and most subscribe to a code of conduct developed by the International Red Cross/Crescent Movement for organizations providing disaster relief. It categorically lays out "The Humanitarian imperative comes first" and "Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint". For example, the Church World Service (the humanitarian branch of the National Council of Churches), a signatory to the code, is emphatic that their relief work "is not based on any form of proselytization." Caritas Internationalis (a group of 162 Catholic relief organizations) is very aware of the need to keep missionary activities distinct from humanitarian aid. According to the Secretary General of Caritas, those who "mix the two are playing a dangerous game, particularly in today's global climate. We do what we do because we are Christian not because we want to make others like us." Active in Indonesia, Caritas prefers to work through local organizations and mosques.

It is true that heavy handed evangelism is not the norm. Nonetheless, the actions and statements of those handing out food with a religious price tag have negatively impacted other faith-based organizations solely involved in humanitarian aid. A similar situation was witnessed in Afghanistan in 2001, after the Taliban arrested

Americans Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry for proselytizing, and subsequently expelled all Christian aid organizations from the country. Many have linked the rise of Christian evangelism to Christian mission strategist Luis Bush and his "10/40 Window Movement". Also termed the Resistance Belt, the 10/40 window refers to a region of the world between ten degrees and forty degrees north of the equator, stretching from western Senegal to eastern China. This rectangular area "encompasses the majority of the world's Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists -- billions of spiritually impoverished souls".  

In Sri Lanka where 74% of the population is Sinhalese Buddhist, the evangelical zeal of the missionaries has been met with an equally fanatic fervor of Buddhist monks to outlaw religious conversions. Prior to the tsunami, in a span of six months more than 50 violent attacks were reported against Christians; 146 Christian places of worship were shut down by radical Buddhists between December 2003 and March 2004; and in November 2003 the office of World Vision, a global Christian aid agency working in Sri Lanka since 1977, was firebombed. And finally in July 2004, the Buddhist nationalist party Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) tabled the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religions Bill in parliament.  

The influx of additional missionaries since the tsunami has only fueled anti-Christian violence already brewing in the country. Although the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled two provisions in the bill as unconstitutional, it was presented in May 2005 for a second reading. According to the legislation, "No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion to another by the use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means, nor shall any person aid or abet any such conversions." The punishment includes a fine and 5-7 years imprisonment. Critics fear that aside from contravening the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Charter, the wording of the bill is so vague that it is difficult to know when one is engaging in 'unethical conversions'. Also, the bill's definition of "force" includes "threat of religious displeasure or condemnation of any religion". While the bill has not been passed yet, a number of Christian organizations have stopped social service programs out of fear that their work could be considered "allurement."

The Sri Lankan anti-conversion laws find their inspiration in the anti-conversion legislation passed in the Indian province of Tamil Nadu, during the BJP government in 2002 - later dropped after the Indian National Congress was voted into power in 2004. This law, along with imposing fines and a prison term for those enabling conversions, also required the person wishing to convert their religion to submit a written application to government officials and have at least a secondary education. According to some, the law was passed to explicitly prevent Dalits and the lower classes from converting (not only to Christianity but also to Islam and Buddhism) and had little to do with religious sanctity. Instead, the aim was to protect the Hindu birth-based political majority and in turn the Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) ideology. Those advocating for the anti conversion law in Sri Lanka accuse Christian missionaries of cultural insensitivity, and of using social programs and material incentives to entice Buddhists to convert. They argue that similar to the Greek Orthodox Church which identifies with the ethnic and cultural histories of Central and Eastern Europe, Buddhism too is inextricably tied to Sri Lanka's national identity. Hence, Christian missionaries trying to convert Buddhists are in effect undermining the country's cultural and national heritage. Most are pointing fingers at American missionaries associated with the Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas.  

Those protesting the anti-conversion laws believe that religious conversions are a form of political/ social protest and missionaries are being targeted as scapegoats to cover up "the inadequacies of institutional Buddhism to address needs in Sri Lankan communities. Historically, the Buddhist temple was at the center of Sri Lankan village life, providing education, acting as a moral guardian, and settling disputes. ... In the face of the decline of the temple, Christian charities arouse ire because they are more effectively addressing some communities' poor than Buddhist institutions." Realizing the delicate nature of the situation, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Asma Jahangir, visited Sri Lanka in May 2005 to meet with government officials and religious groups to assess the situation. She has yet to present her report. The violence against Christians, whether in the shape of a reaction to proselytization or internal sectarian conflicts, has not deterred the efforts of Christian evangelicals. Not only is the 10/40 window of importance to missionaries, it also seems to be a focal point for the current US foreign policy. In the span of three and half years the White House has attacked Afghanistan and Iraq, countries in the heart of the 10/40 window, and then...
proceeded to fund and support Christian missions in these countries. This is being interpreted as theo-political and cultural imperialism and is building resentment against the United States. Moreover, it is advancing the "Clash of Civilizations" theory that suggests that conflicts over national identity, culture and religion will replace old tensions of secular ideologies and economics. However, instead of it being Islam against the West, as suggested by Samuel Huntington,22 in the current climate it seems to be Western Christianity against the Rest.

There is no denying missionaries have given millions of dollars in aid and put in countless hours of charitable work in developing countries. Traditionally, missionaries have stepped in and provided social services, specifically in the field of health and education, where local governments have been unable to. However, groups combining Christian proclamation with Christian compassion are doing a disservice to the admirable humanitarian efforts of those who believe in following Christ's example as a healer and feeder without it being contingent on Jesus' message of salvation. Most of those involved in proselytization are often untrained, short term missionaries not familiar with the region's customs or culture. Although their intentions may be good, their religious nationalism combined with socio-political insensitivities and inappropriate methodologies often undermine the very message they are trying to communicate. Early missionary activity was holistic and spread the virtues of hard work, a combination called the "Bible and Plough". Today's evangelicals are, at best, creating a new breed of 'Rice Christians'23 who go to their "Jesus mosques" and pray to Christ alongside Ram and Krishna. And at worse, they are contributing to the ever deepening religious fault lines in countries that are already violently divided by sectarian and religious strife.

Notes

1. The Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was also set-up in the federal departments of Justice, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Agriculture, Commerce, and Veterans Affairs; and the Small Business Administration.


4. The Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was also set-up in the federal departments of Justice, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Agriculture, Commerce, and Veterans Affairs; and the Small Business Administration.

5. The quote is attributed to John Brady, the Northern Africa and Middle East outreach director for the Southern Baptist Church. According to him "Southern Baptists must understand there is a war for souls under way in Iraq." Peace & Conflict Monitor. http://www.monitor.upeace.org/archive.cfm?id_article=161, as viewed on 23 April 2005.

6. According to a Time Magazine internal memo "We are planning a major piece on the flood of Christian missionaries, most of them evangelical, to Muslim countries. We will touch on all kinds of missionary work … but we will eventually narrow our focus to a more radical crew of proselytizers: those who proclaim the Gospel of Christ, even if that means risking deportation, imprisonment or death." World Net Daily, http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=32193. As viewed on 23 April 2005


15. Knight Ridder Newspapers. Jim Remsen "In Asia, some Christian groups spread supplies - and the word" 9 Jan 2005


18. Initially, two separate acts were proposed to parliament - one by the Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)
and the other by Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, the Minister for Buddhist Affairs. Also, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court has ruled "the constitution does not recognize a fundamental right to propagate a religion" and that "the propagation and spreading of Christianity...would impair the very existence of Buddhism". Article 9 of Sri Lanka's Constitution gives prominence to Buddhism over other religions and holds the State responsible for its protection.

19. Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry, the Americans arrested by the Talibans also belonged to the Antioch Church.
22. Huntington, S. "The Clash of Civilizations?" in Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993
23. A derogatory term used to describe those who accept Christianity out of hunger rather than genuine conviction.

EDITORIAL NOTE: The information contained in this web resource does not necessarily represent the views and positions of WHRNet/AWID/WLULM unless stated. This web resource is meant to make accessible the broadest possible strands of opinion within varied movements / initiatives promoting greater autonomy of women. It seeks to inform and share different analysis and experiences.