For countries with thousands left homeless and bereft by the tsunami, the outpouring of help from around the world is a godsend. Yet in some nations, the growing presence of faith-based agencies dispensing the aid is posing another challenge - stirring tensions already simmering around evangelism and anti-Christian violence.

In Sri Lanka, for example, prior to the tsunami, two anti-conversion bills that would make "unethical conversions" illegal were introduced into parliament. Reacting to a perceived increase in Christian proselytizing, the bill proposed by a militant Buddhist party would impose fines and five to seven years imprisonment for anyone who gives material aid to someone of another faith.

Omalpe Sobitha, a Buddhist monk member of parliament, charged aid groups with offering money, food, employment, or other inducements to convert people to Christianity.

A week before the tsunami hit, a church in Sri Lanka was burned to the ground - the latest in more than 160 violent attacks against churches and pastors in the past two years. In November 2003, the office of World Vision, a global Christian aid agency active in Sri Lanka since 1977, was firebombed.

"World Vision was mentioned specifically in parliamentary debates on the legislation, though we don't seek to convert anyone," says Dean Owen, its director of communications. Like several major organizations with faith connections, World Vision follows a Red Cross code of conduct that bans proselytizing.

But since 2000, Evangelical Christians across the globe have mounted a missionary effort targeting the "10/40 Window" - the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist nations between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitude. East Asians, such as Koreans, as well as Westerners are active in several countries.

But now the tsunami has drawn a host of smaller Christian groups to the region. They see the tragedy as an opportunity to present their spiritual message along with material aid.

There are reports in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka of groups handing out Christian tracts purporting to explain the tragedy, seeking to move Muslim children into
Christian orphanages, or urging those they provide with goods to attend prayer meetings.

"I think evangelists do this out of the best intentions, but there is a responsibility to try to understand other faith groups and their culture," says Vince Isner, director of FaithfulAmerica.org, a program of the National Council of Churches USA, who just returned from Sri Lanka.

"There's a power imbalance when people are in dire need," he adds. "When others offer aid and ask, 'By the way, do you know why this happened to you? There's a better way,' it becomes a delicate power struggle."

Sri Lanka's Buddhist roots go back 2,500 years; Christianity, linked in the minds of many there to colonialism, arrived first with the Portuguese, then with the British. Today, the island is mostly Buddhist (70 percent), but has minorities of Hindus (15 percent), and Muslims and Christians (each 7 percent).

A group of Buddhist monks was elected to parliament last April as members of a radical National Heritage Party (JHU) that promotes anticonversion legislation, a constitutional amendment to make Buddhism the state religion, and an end to government corruption.

In December, the JHU threatened to fast unto death unless the government agreed to bring the anticonversion bill up for a vote. Since the tsunami, it has publicly questioned the legality of the funds World Vision is getting, saying they should be distributed by the government.

Sri Lanka is a signatory to the international covenants that ensure political and religious rights; and the US State Department has expressed concern about the "overall deterioration in religious freedom" there.

"Sri Lanka is a multi-religious, multiethnic, secular democracy," says Devinda Subasinghe, the country's ambassador to the US. "Buddhism permeates the society and culture, not too dissimilar to the way Judeo-Christian values permeate US society. But that in no way suggests any hostility toward the flourishing of other religions."

The Sri Lankan government says it respects religious liberty and has signed international covenants. But it may also feel the need to placate militant Buddhists, suggests Roger Severino, a lawyer for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a US-based law firm which is working with some Christian churches in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Severino points out that there are significant concerns about the fact that the Sri Lanka supreme court has ruled that while the constitution protects religious freedom, it "does not recognize a fundamental right to propagate a religion."

The second anti-conversion bill, drafted by the ministry of Buddhist affairs apparently as a counter to the JHU bill, may have even broader in its implications.

"The way these laws are cast with rather sweeping language would make even an accidental conversion an act for which the religious body giving the aid is guilty," says John Witte, an expert on law and religion at Emory University in Atlanta.
Some worry the massive relief efforts now under way present a potentially explosive situation.

A few instances of genuine proselytizing have been reported in Sri Lanka. But most groups are "focusing on delivering the relief people require," says Ambassador Subasinghe.

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