

WCC explores Christian self-understanding in context of Hindu religion

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With the rise of religious fundamentalism and religious extremism in the world, as well as recently emerging tensions in India over the issues of conversions, a genuine need exists to review Christian-Hindu relationships afresh, according to the participants of a consultation organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) on Christian self-understanding in the context of Hindu religion.

The consultation took place at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland from 12 to 15 October, with thirty participants of diverse Christian backgrounds from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia, where Christians live with Hindus in close proximity.

The discussions focused on “Christian self-understanding in relation to Hindu religion” emphasizing dialogue of life and action. Mapping these changes, as well as exploring historical contexts was a focus of the consultation.

Recalling the challenges of churches, the WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit in his opening address urged churches to “make creative responses to religious plurality, to foster harmonious relations between religious traditions, and to explore in greater depth the significance of religious plurality to Christian theology, practice and self-understanding”.

The consultation emphasized the importance of recognizing, affirming and enhancing the ongoing “dialogue of life” which had been prevalent and continues to be the bedrock of Hindu-Christian relations over the centuries.

The participants also affirmed the need for “dialogue of action”, where the adherents of Hindu and Christian religions join forces in their struggle for justice, peace, human dignity and issues of common concern to the community.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, director of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, in a presentation on “Hindu nationalism and politicization of religion” stated that “proponents of *Hindutva* ideology represent only a small sector within the Hindu community. However, the increasing trend of politicization of religion becomes a hindrance to the spirit of nurturing the long tradition of religious tolerance and communal harmony in India”.

While acknowledging “the rich traditions of spirituality and tolerance of Hindu religion” the participants agreed that “they do not equate *Hindutva* ideology with that of the Hindu religion”.

The consultation also called for alliances across the religious and secular divides in search for greater justice for all, especially in a context that Hindu social structure and organization on the basis of caste hierarchy marginalize a significant segment of the population as “outcastes”.

A communiqué adopted at the end of the consultation says, “A genuine encounter with the spiritual dimensions of Hinduism can enlighten and enrich Christian experience and theology. In this regard, recovering the spiritual dimensions and the interiority of Christian life as a community of Jesus, and a renewed emphasis on the Reign of God, were seen as important to the life of the church in the Hindu context”.

The WCC has been engaged in exploring Christian self-understanding amid religiously plural world. This includes strengthening interreligious trust and respect through dialogue efforts with other faiths. The consultation was one of such efforts.