

## Churches' mission statement



Having arrived at what they described as a “broad consensus”, representatives of 90 per cent of the world’s Christians have published guidelines on how to conduct relations with each other and with members of other faiths. It is an important step forward in relations between different Christian denominations, but its real significance may lie elsewhere. In many parts of the world Christians live cheek by jowl with other religions. Often they are a minority group. Violence is sometimes stirred up by troublemakers when Christians are accused of evangelising and seeking to convert others to Christianity. This has happened time and again in the Middle East and the Asian subcontinent.

In most cases the troublemakers are militant Islamists, but in India it has also occurred with militant Hindus. Such charges will be much easier to refute now these guidelines are in existence. They also provide ammunition for church authorities seeking to restrain the more zealous of their own members. Long periods of peaceful coexistences have on occasion been jeopardised when evangelists arrive on the scene from outside, insensitive to local traditions of life and let live.

There are signs amid the events of the Arab Spring that militant Islamism may be on the wane, and in Egypt there were heart-warming moments of solidarity between Muslims and Coptic Christians as the crisis there unfolded. On the other hand, the military dictatorships which are being rejected across the Arab world did also offer a measure of protection to minority groups. It remains to be seen how minorities will fare under more democratic regimes.

Moderate Muslims anxious to spread the message that Christians are not a threat will find the guidelines helpful. Indeed, they echo the Qur’anic declaration that “there should be no coercion in religion”. They rule out misrepresentation, exploitation, inducements or rewards; and stress that religious conversion, to be real, requires full consent, and time to reflect. The guidelines are insistent, however, that Christians have a right to preach their message. It follows that so do others.

Missionary rivalry between Christian Churches is largely a thing of the past, though in Latin America conservative Protestant, especially Pentecostal, evangelists have made huge inroads in what was once an almost exclusively Catholic continent. It is significant that some Pentecostal groups have signed up to the guidelines through the World Evangelical Alliance, which took part in the conversations alongside the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

The Catholic approach was shaped by the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious

Freedom, the terms of which are reflected in the text. In past centuries the Catholic Church has been one of the main offenders against the principles of religious freedom, though it has also been one of the principal victims when this freedom has been denied it by others.

The guidelines remain to be translated into detailed policy by the Churches represented in the negotiations. That process needs to be more than lip-service. A good grassroots debate as the guidelines come to be applied would help to educate many of these unwittingly intolerant Christians that due respect for members of other faiths is a requirement of the Gospel.

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