

Religious Freedom: Religious Minorities, Majorities and the State

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Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke, president of the World Congress of Faiths, chaired the session and introduced it by pointing out that while it was in the 20th century that human rights were affirmed, although the ideas had always existed in scripture, the hope of the 21 century was that all people could enjoy them. He then read out article 18 which is concerned with freedom of thought, conscience and religion. He pointed out that many religions don't have a good record of allowing people to change their religion or marry out of their religion. This led him to conclude that one test of the maturity of a religion is its willingness to let people go. He encouraged religious people to speak out and campaign together about religious freedom issues as they are more effective than when they act alone.

The first speaker was Willy Fautre, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers. His organisation has been investigating first hand the violation of the human rights of Unification Church members in Japan. Apparently 1000s of adult members of the Unification Church have been abducted by their parents and held in confinement while their parents tried to persuade them to leave the church. Parents often asked Protestant pastors to help deconvert and counsel their children. This attempted deconversion often lasted months or even years. Up until recently this was a taboo subject in Japan and the victims, who often escaped, would not bring civil charges against their parents. The state also was not enforcing the human rights law which allowed exit counsellors to publically recommend abduction and deconversion.

The next speaker, Katharina Grieb, President of the International Society For Human Rights Austria, discussed the contemporary persecution of Christians around the world which she said was worse than at any other time in history. She surveyed the mistreatment of Christians under communism in the 20th century before moving on to the situation in the Islamic world. The Arab spring, she said, had turned into an Arab winter for many Christians who cannot freely practise their faith. Under the secular regimes they were treated as equal citizens but now were losing that status. In many African countries too the church is coming under pressure from Islam.

Imam Sajid, Chairman of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony, followed by saying how ashamed he was as a Muslim to hear about the persecution of Christians in Muslim countries. He claimed that Christians had a worse record on religious freedom when they went to other countries. He said it was not Islam that was the problem as it guaranteed religious freedom but bad people who follow Islam. Islam he said protects other believers and it was the role of the state to protect its citizens and uphold the rule of law.

The final speaker was Sheikh Rahmanan Ahmadiyyan Muslim. He reported about the mistreatment and persecution of Ahmadiyyans in Pakistan focusing on a mosque that had been demolished in Lahore. He became quite emotional as he described what had happened in the country – Pakistan – that he loved as a mother. The treatment of Ahmadiyyans was akin to anti-Semitism in its institutionalised hatred. This he found all the more shocking as in Pakistan all minorities are supposed to be equal.