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Original

## **Statement on the Politicization of Religion and Rights of Religious Minorities**

As Christians we confess the dignity accorded to all human beings by God the creator. This forms the basis for a Christian understanding of human rights. We consider freedom of religion a foundational and distinctive human right of particular importance. We want to acknowledge with gratefulness that in many contexts the importance of religious freedom as expressed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is acknowledged and safeguarded as a right for all to experience.

The World Council of Churches (WCC), from its inception, has consistently expressed its concern regarding the freedom of religion. The WCC through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) engages member churches through various initiatives in addressing specific situations of freedom of religion and human rights. However, the WCC has never dealt with the issue of the right to religious freedom in isolation. The first WCC assembly in 1948 stated its conviction regarding “freedom of religion as an essential element in good international order” and also affirmed that in “pleading for this freedom, Christians do not ask for any privilege to be granted to Christians that is denied to others”. The Tenth Assembly meeting in Busan during the year of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the issuance of the Edict of Milan granting tolerance to Christians and all religions reiterates its commitment to religious freedom.<sup>1</sup> The WCC has upheld these principles during the past decades of its struggle for religious freedom and human rights.

Over the years, the WCC has adopted different statements addressing questions related to freedom of religion and human rights as well as responses to specific situations of denial of the right to religious freedom. In recent years the WCC has been concerned about the alarming trend of growing instances of hatred, intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief in different parts of the world where religious minorities have been forced to live in vulnerable circumstances. There have been a number of instances reported in recent years from different parts of the world on a rise in the denial of religious freedom to religious minorities. It is in this context that the WCC has taken several initiatives during the past three years specifically to address problems related to the rights of religious minorities.

### **Freedom of Religion: an inherent human right**

Respect for freedom of religion should be treated as an inherent human right and political virtue which is a fundamental prerequisite for the democratic and peaceful progress of human society. Freedom of religion cannot be enjoyed without equality and justice. There can be no real freedom without equality and there can be no equality without the potential inclusion and participation of all citizens in any society. An adequate Christian understanding of human rights emphasizes freedom, equality and participation as embodiments of human rights. Freedom of religion is based on the intrinsic dignity of a human being, who is endowed by God with reason and free will. The cardinal principle of right to religious freedom, besides being a natural human right and a civil right, is rooted in biblical teaching and a theological emphasis of human dignity. We reiterate our affirmation that all human beings are created in the image of God, and Jesus Christ is the one in whom true humanity is perfectly realized.

The presence of the image of God in each human person and in the whole of humanity affirms the essentially relational character of human nature and emphasizes human dignity. Widespread and grievous violations of this freedom affect the stability, security and development of any society and severely impact upon the daily lives of individuals, families and communities and the wellbeing of the society. It is therefore essential first to affirm that all people are endowed with inherent dignity. This is not only because human beings are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), but Christians make the further assertion of this universal and inherent value of all from a Trinitarian perspective.

The WCC has always recognized the significance of international human rights regimes and standards relating to the freedom of religion and belief. During the work of the United Nations while drafting the UDHR of 1948, the CCIA took an active role in formulating Article 18 of the UDHR which articulates “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”. It contains normative core values which constitute the minimum standard that should be protected: inner freedom, external freedom including the propagation of one's religion, freedom from compulsion or coercion, freedom from discrimination, respect of the rights of parents and guardians and the right of the child to religious self-determination, as well as corporate freedom and legal status of religious bodies. This includes the right of conscientious objection as well as reasonable accommodation of employees' belief by employers.

This commitment was subsequently affirmed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both of 1966. This was further expanded in the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, of 1981. These rights also extend to those who do not profess a religion as their thought and conscience enjoy the same freedom. It is our firm conviction based on our theological underpinnings that human rights do not constitute a goal in themselves for protecting the interests or rights of only certain groups, but we see human rights show us the direction in which society should develop towards peace with justice. They are a vehicle enabling the life of everybody to acquire fuller and richer quality. It is in relation to life that all aspects of human rights must be assessed and in this context, the rights to freedom of religion and freedom of expression by individuals must be realized in every society.

We have reiterated the principles and values of freedom of religion and the duty of states and governing authorities to respect, protect and promote the freedom of religion or belief, in all its dimensions, for all individuals under their jurisdiction or control without regard to their religion or belief. It is with these convictions that the WCC emphasises the need to strengthen the existing protection mechanisms and devise effective safeguards against violations of national and international law relating to religious freedom. We are of the opinion that there should be concerted and coordinated efforts on the part of religious, civil society and state actors in order to protect the right to freedom of religion. In the current context, the fear is quite real that religious minorities may be further suppressed in certain countries by a rising wave of religious extremism. The rights of minority religious communities to live in peace and harmony amidst their neighbours belonging to majority religious communities is vital not only for the people belonging to faith minority groups but also for overall stability and democratic governance, especially in countries that are liberated from past elements of authoritarianism.

Rights of religious minorities in all contexts should be rooted in a democratic principle that majority and minority are to be treated as equal beneficiaries of the state, and that dignity and human rights of all people are respected and valued. Governments, religious communities, national and international human rights institutions and civil society organizations should play different roles in order to protect the rights of religious minorities and promote religious tolerance, especially when politicization of religion intensifies religious hatred and violates rights of religious minorities. Violations of freedom of religion or belief against persons belonging to religious minorities, whether perpetrated by states or

non-state actors, need to be combated, be it in forms of disinformation, discrimination or persecution. Individual and communitarian rights of people belonging to all religious minorities should be respected. This is what the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief pointed out in his recent report, saying that, in keeping with the principle of normative universalism, “the rights of persons belonging to religious minorities cannot be confined to the members of certain predefined groups. Instead, they should be open to all persons who live *de facto* in the situation of a minority and are in need of special protection to facilitate a free and non-discriminatory development of their individual and communitarian identities”. The rights of persons belonging to all minority religious groups therefore should be treated as fundamental human rights.

### **Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics**

The contemporary world is witnessing a trend of politicization of religion. As religion occupies a more and more critical space in politics and public life, the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics have become pervasive phenomena in many parts of the world. The trend is that politicization of religion adds to political polarization, and hence the religious divide manifests itself in almost every corner of the globe. When religion becomes a dividing force in the social and political arena, in its more intensive and durable form, it can contribute to a religious chasm. Choosing political allies with more radical positions allows a religion better to defend its interests in the political arena so as to win a privileged position and favours from the government. In recent history we have witnessed the multifaceted trend of politicization of religion, but the flip side of this phenomenon, especially the impact of the religionization of politics, has not always been identified.

The religionization of politics, which destroys communal harmony and intensifies religious hatred, is simultaneously being instrumentalized for political purposes. The religionization of politics in this context ultimately leads politics to pander to the interests of religious groups and leaders who would like to influence and control political power. Religion is being used as an effective instrument in several countries during national elections in order to create specific vote banks, especially prior to elections. The problems, by and large, persist in the assumption that parties or movements are only successful if they invoke religious identity during elections. The strategies used by certain religious groups are to devise and carve roles for themselves in politics by way of invoking religious sentiments against other, minority religious groups. At the same time they position themselves as true champions of their religion which is under threat from minority religions and their foreign affiliation. When religion is used for political gain, relations between different religious communities are increasingly impacted by changes in local and national politics which have been largely reconfigured along particular religious lines. This trend also adds reasons for people of different religions to think in narrow terms of religious sentiments and consider that their religion is more prominent than others. The rising trend of the politicization of religion thus causes serious problems not only for Christians, but it affects different religious communities who live as minorities in many areas of the world. The politicization of religion and the rise of religious extremism in many societies mutually reinforce each other. It not only poses a threat to freedom of religion of the adherents to minority religions, but the survival of religious minorities is affected.

### **Rise in religious intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities**

We have observed with great concern several cases where the exercise of freedom of expression has been used as an excuse to violate freedom of religion for religious minorities. While the concept of “minority” is mostly a social and political construct, on a practical level these socio-political constructs can and do have a devastating effect on the group of people who lack the strength of numbers amid a “majority” religious community, although this situation is not restricted to religion alone.

While we recognize and indeed welcome the many positive steps taken towards a fuller respect for freedom of religion or belief in numerous contexts, we are also cognizant of the many serious violations of these rights which are of grave concern, such as the violation of the fundamental right to religious freedom by governments, individuals and majority religious groups. The continuing practices which limit the right to change one’s religious status can result in the separation of families, material

and social deprivation or even criminal prosecution, imprisonment or the death penalty. Anti-conversion provisions, which are open to misuse and contribute to negative public perceptions of, and violence towards religious minority communities, as found in the legislation of a number of countries should be reconsidered.

We note with concern the tendency in recent years that the discussion on freedom of religion and belief has focussed more on issues related to defamation of religion; this negates the spirit of the universally accepted norm of an individual's right to freedom of religion and belief. Moving to an approach that protects religions rather than people only undermines the basic human rights principles and international human rights standards as well as giving way to abuse laws in local contexts that persecute religious minorities. The provisions introduced in criminal procedures to misuse blasphemy laws in several countries are clear examples of this. Article 20 of the ICCPR lays down principles that "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law". However, the trend is that "incitement to hatred" has been increasing, even in countries that have acceded to the ICCPR. Hence it has become a major concern that incidents which concern article 20 of the ICCPR are not being prosecuted and punished. At the same time a report of the Office of the United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2012, "Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred", observed that:

"the members of minorities are *de facto* persecuted, with a chilling effect on others, through the abuse of vague domestic legislation, jurisprudence and policies. This dichotomy of (1) no prosecution of "real" incitement cases and (2) persecution of minorities under the guise of domestic incitement laws seems to be pervasive. Anti-incitement laws in countries across the world may be qualified as heterogeneous, at times excessively narrow or vague; jurisprudence on incitement to hatred has been scarce and *ad hoc*; and while several states have adopted related policies, most of them too general and not systematically followed up, lacking focus and deprived of proper impact-assessments".

We see the danger that, as majority religious groups use their religion as a tool to influence the political system and political rulers, religious minorities living in the same societies are persecuted and discriminated against. Often their strategies lead to violence which threatens the very existence of the religious minorities. The alarming trend we note is that there are cases where a conflict in one place, with its local causes and character, is misinterpreted and instrumentalized as part of a conflict in another place, especially when extremist groups use religion to legitimize violence. However, it is heartening to note that the key role religion plays in conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace-building is often evident and recognized. In several countries in the world, people who identify themselves as being politically and economically excluded often feel that dominant religious groups which wield power apply discriminatory standards in dealing with minority rights issues such as freedom of religion. Although the reasons for the problems have their roots in socio-economic factors, social fragmentation and communal hatred, such actions may increase even in traditionally tolerant societies when religion is mobilized for political purposes. The prevailing situations, especially in Asia, Africa and the Middle East prove that religions can impact and influence the geo-political contexts of countries and regions. The new developments in the context of the "Arab Spring" witnessed a number of groups and parties in the Middle East and North Africa ascend into dominant positions in the name of majority religion. In countries in the Middle East region such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Iran, religious minorities live in a situation of fear and insecurity.

There are instances that restrict or limit religious freedom of minority religious communities which have been observed in recent years in the United States, Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as in certain European countries. In practice, the discrimination and intolerance against religious groups in these countries are evident in discourses and regulations introduced by governments that question or ban religious dress, symbols and traditions.

Religious minorities in various countries face discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. Discriminatory legislation and state practices provide a legitimatizing framework for wider discrimination in society. Deprivation, social exclusion and violence towards minorities are the inevitable results of systematic discrimination which threatens the social fabric of society. Numerous religious communities encounter problems in obtaining the legal status necessary to function, as well as in acquiring, building or maintaining properties such as places of worship and burial grounds or facilities. In particular, religious minorities in several countries are denied their rights in this regard. Discrimination against religious minorities is also seriously affecting their ability to access their rights to education, healthcare and employment and to participate in the political process. In many instances, educational syllabuses and text books portray negatively or under-represent the role of religious minority groups in society. This also serves to affirm existing societal prejudices and promote intolerance and discrimination. Obligatory religious education of children of minority religious backgrounds in the majority faith violates the rights of parents and children. Existing legislations and state practices with regard to mixed marriages in certain countries negatively impact the right to religious freedom in bringing up children of such marriages of people who belong to religious minorities.

The failure of states to protect religious minorities from violence threatens the survival of communities and is in violation of states' international obligations. The culture of impunity created by failures to investigate and prosecute crimes against members of minority communities in a number of countries is evident in the politicization of religion. For example, the inaction of government and failure to implement a proper law enforcement mechanism results in gradual erosion of a long-nurtured tradition of religious tolerance. This encourages a culture of politicization of religion which threatens the very existence of religious minorities. In a country like Pakistan, the politicization of religion by military dictatorships, introduced through changes in the penal code, systematized the misuse of the Blasphemy Law which is now a major instrument used by the religious extremists against the religious minorities in the country. The politicization of religion in the Indian context constantly threatens communal harmony and peaceful co-existence of people belonging to different faiths. Constitutional guarantees of the right to religious freedom face continual threat and minority religious groups are often under attack from religious extremist groups who try to mobilize religions and religious sentiments for political gains. The politicization of religion and the religionization of politics in different African nations intensify religious hatred, communal violence and political instability. Religious extremist groups of majority religions as well as political parties are responsible for creating such situations. Northern Nigeria, Tanzania, Sudan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar among others, provide examples of continuing violence in the name of religion and the spread of religious hatred. In certain other situations, ruling governments are using religion to wield the support of majority religions with an aim to create communal vote banks and political power. Often such actions lead to conflicts and violence, especially when governments deny religious freedom as well as when social and government restrictions on religion or a minority group are imposed. Some examples of cases where the WCC has been involved: In Malaysia, where objections to using the word "Allah" by Christians have exacerbated religious hatred and tension over the years, pro-government political parties have been responsible for intensifying the controversy. The Methodist Church of Fiji has been denied its freedom to exist as a religious body and has been continuously denied permission to convene its national assembly in the country due to interference by the government. The government of the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has categorically denied the Orthodox Archdiocese of Ochrid the right to registration as a religious body. The interference of the government in the country's legal system resulted in the illegal detention of the head of the church. Kosovo faced in recent times systematic destruction of over 100 Orthodox Christian shrines while leading to historical revisionism with regard to their cultural patrimony, threatening the very existence of the Serbian Orthodox faithful. In Albania Orthodox churches are not always adequately protected, with regard to recent incidents of extremely violent actions that have occurred during times of living worship.

The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Busan, Republic of Korea, from 30 October to 8 November 2013, therefore:

- A. **Reaffirms** the commitment of the WCC to the principle of the universal right of all persons to freedom of religion or belief;
- B. **Reiterates** our conviction that the Church is an important element in promoting and defending religious freedom and rights of religious minorities, based on its historic values and ethos of upholding human dignity and the human rights of every individual;
- C. **Recognizes** and reiterates that the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief should be the concern and work of the churches and the ecumenical community as part of their prophetic witness;
- D. **Calls** upon WCC member churches to engage actively in defending the rights of all religious minorities and their right to freedom of religion or belief, especially in opposing legislation or regulations that would limit religious freedom in contravention of international human rights standards;
- E. **Recognizes** the positive steps being taken by various states towards a fuller respect for freedom of religion or belief in a number of contexts;
- F. **Expresses** grave concern on the increasing trend of politicization of religion and religionization of politics as well as the growing trend of terrorism that threaten the social fabric of a society and the peaceful co-existence of religious communities;
- G. **Expresses** grave concern on state interference in the decision-making processes of religious groups, and the imposition of religious law and jurisprudence through state sanctions;
- H. **Calls** upon the ecumenical community around the world to mediate with their respective governments to develop policies of providing effective protection of persons and communities belonging to minority religions against threats or acts of violence from non-state actors;
- I. **Calls** upon governments to strengthen the existing protection mechanisms and enact legislation to protect the rights of members of religious minorities and introduce effective measures and apply universal normative status regarding freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; including the right to change religion and to manifest your belief;
- J. **Urges** states to repeal criminal law provisions that misuse blasphemy laws, apostasy laws or anti-conversion laws to punish deviation from majority religions or to discriminate against religious minorities and violate their right to freedom of religion or belief;
- K. **Urges** states to implement anti-discrimination legislation to protect persons and communities belonging to different religions, especially to end discrimination and persecution for their faith or belief;
- L. **Commends** the UN for its advocacy of freedom of religion or belief and *calls* on the UN, especially the Human Rights Council, to give the same priority to freedom of religion or belief as is given to other fundamental human rights and to resist any attempts to weaken the principle of freedom of religion or belief;
- M. **Calls** on the UN to strengthen the office of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
- N. **Calls** for concerted and coordinated efforts on the part of religious, civil society and state actors in order to address violations of rights of religious minorities and their freedom of religion and belief.

**APPROVED by consensus**

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<sup>i</sup> The Waldensian Church delegation wished to register its dissent to the mention of the Edict of Milan, feeling that it is unhelpful to make reference in a statement on religious freedom to an historical moment when Church and State became closely aligned, resulting in an era of freedom for only one religion.