

DALAI LAMA OPENS FIRST WORLD CONGRESS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Religious leaders call for moratorium on conversions to create better climate for dialogue

NEW DELHI, India—November 19, 2001--Religious leaders from around the world and from many faiths convened in New Delhi, India on November 15-18 for the first world congress for the preservation of religious diversity. The purpose of the congress was to call for the abandonment of organized and planned convergence and for the protection for religious traditions that have been targeted for proselytization. Religious leaders see this as an important preliminary step for the fostering of mutual respect and better cooperation among religions.

Several hundred religious leaders participated in the world congress, which produced steps outlining greater religious cooperation. The Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee and His Holiness the Dalai Lama opened the congress. The Dalai Lama spoke about the need to preserve religious diversity, which is one of the greatest treasures of the human heritage. The Prime Minister stressed that religious tolerance is the basis of every great religious tradition.

Religious leaders from around the world called organized conversion a form of cultural imperialism and described it as an aggressive act against indigenous cultures.

“Organized conversion has brought pain to the individuals involved and great harm to their culture and tradition, said Swami Dayananda Saraswati, organizer of the conference. Individuals should have the freedom to choose their own religion but they should not be subjected to outside pressures”.

The congress called for a redefining of those theologies that promote organized conversion and called for a 5-year moratorium on proselytization to create a more open and positive arena for dialogue.

A planning committee is being established to form a global commission for the preservation of religious diversity. The commission will organize dialogue around the world to foster better inter-religious cooperation.

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Shri Shri Dayananda Saraswati is a traditional teacher of Vedanta and an eminent scholar of Sanskrit. He has established three institutions of learning and culture: two in India, the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Anaikkatti and the Swami Dayananda Ashram in Rishikesh; one in the USA, the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania.