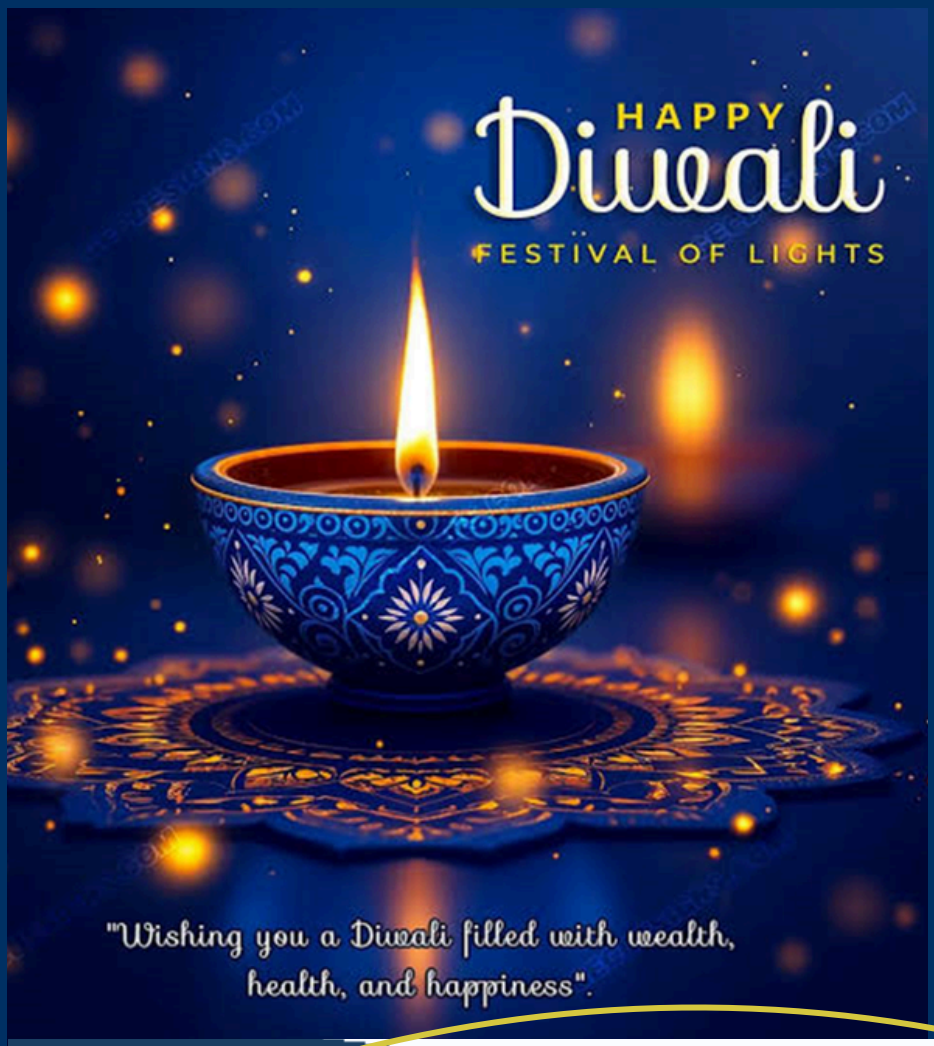
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INTER-RELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY COUNCIL

IRSC NEWSLETTER

PURPOSE

Building Peace, Harmony and Solidarity through Inter-Religious Understanding.



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A Brief Narrative of the Work of the Inter-Religious Solidarity Council

Founded on 15 July 2023, the Inter-Religious Solidarity Council (IRSC) is a multi-faith platform bringing religious leaders together to counter identity-based hatred and division through non-violent action. Its work reaffirms India's values of tolerance, dignity and shared humanity, and celebrates pluralism and peace.



At its founding, 24 religious leaders came together to speak collectively against intolerance and promote respect, harmony and acceptance of diversity. They affirmed that religions share values such as love, compassion, truth and respect for life, and that education and interfaith dialogue can help address misunderstandings and fear.

Participants proposed youth courses, school curricula, human clubs and interfaith program.The Council's early activities focused on religious freedom and shared celebration. In October 2023, a discussion at Anjuman E Islam in Mumbai brought together scholars from eight faith traditions and more than 70 participants. They affirmed that religious freedom should be protected for all, condemned violence and terrorism in religion's name, and called for solidarity with communities facing violations.



In April 2024, more than 80 people gathered in Mumbai to celebrate Holi and Easter and express solidarity during Ramadan, sharing reflections on goodness, self-discipline, hope, love and compassion. The Council also expanded its Advisory Council, updated its vision and mission statements, and resolved to organize public events addressing extremism and prejudice.

In July 2024, the IRSC convened a multi-faith assembly in Mumbai, facilitated by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) and the Institute of Indian Culture (IIC). Leaders from several religious traditions and rationalist perspectives affirmed the value of diversity and recommended regular meetings to counter extremism.

They also pledged to hold an event commemorating Swami Vivekanand[illegible] 1893 address at the World Parliament of Religions as a National Day of Tolerance.



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A Brief Narrative of the Work of the Inter-Religious Solidarity Council Contd...

In 2025, the Council continued to bring communities together through celebration, solidarity and public reflection. The "Symphony of Religions: Interfaith Holi Milan," conceptualized by the IRSC and hosted by ISKCON at its Girgaon temple, gathered representatives of several faiths alongside the observances of Holi, Ramzan, Lent and Nowruz. The programme celebrated shared spirituality and inclusion, including Muslim attendees breaking their Ramadan fast with temple prasad.

Following the 22 April 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam, the IRSC held an interfaith prayer meeting at the Bahá'í Centre in Mumbai. Leaders condemned the attack, rejected violence in religion's name and expressed concern about retaliatory hostility and communal targeting. They urged citizens to maintain peace and emphasized the importance of trust, reconciliation and compassion.

In June 2025, more than 70 leaders representing eight faith traditions met to discuss "Religion and Spirituality: Pathways to Peace." The gathering emphasized shared values such as compassion, non-violence, justice and service, and called for interfaith work to extend beyond discussion into community outreach and conflict resolution. The Council also expanded its Advisory Council, updated its vision and mission statements, and resolved to organize public events addressing extremism and prejudice.





The IRSC's second Mumbai Parliament of Religions, co-hosted with CSSS and the Bahá'í Centre in September 2025, brought together around 150 participants under the theme "Religion and Social Challenges." Speakers explored how faith can address gender equality, caste discrimination, LGBTQIA+ rights, communal violence and environmental stewardship. The assembly reaffirmed a shared commitment to peaceful coexistence and social responsibility.

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In May 2026, the Mumbai Conclave of Religions brought faith leaders, scholars, artists and civil society members together to consider religious extremism and harmony with nature. Its key messages called for moving beyond symbolic coexistence toward everyday ethical responsibility, rejecting violence and hatred, and recognizing the links between ecological destruction and social injustice. Follow-up priorities included sustaining interfaith dialogue, promoting environmental stewardship, using art and education to nurture empathy, and turning belief into practical community action.



The Council also organized, jointly with Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, “Celebrating the Life and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad: From Faith to Action: A Shared Call for Justice, Equality and Human Dignity.” More than 120 participants and leaders from diverse faiths explored the Prophet’s life as an inspiration for conflict resolution, social reform and compassion. Through discussion, an interactive Seerat exhibition, literature displays and multilingual devotional poetry, the program highlighted shared commitments to human dignity, service and opposition to injustice.

Across its activities, the IRSC has worked to build relationships among faith communities and to connect dialogue with action. Its programs affirm that shared ethical values can help counter prejudice, strengthen solidarity and support a more peaceful and just society.





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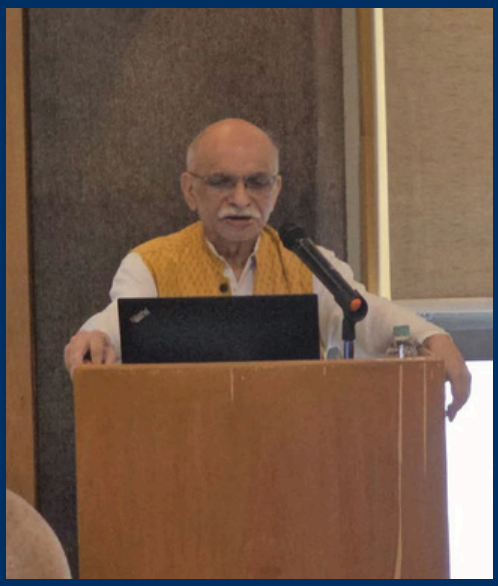
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The Courage to Live Together: A Message for Religious Harmony

We live in a world of extraordinary religious, cultural and philosophical diversity. This diversity is a source of immense richness, offering humanity different paths to explore life's deeper questions, cultivate moral values and discover the purpose of our existence. Yet, paradoxically, religion—which has the potential to inspire love, compassion, forgiveness and selfless service—is sometimes invoked to create divisions, fuel prejudice and justify hostility. The challenge before us is not merely to coexist despite our differences, but to learn to live together with mutual respect, trust and a shared commitment to humanity.





It is in this spirit that the Inter-Religious Solidarity Council (IRSC) seeks to bring together religious leaders, faith communities and conscientious members of civil society. Our endeavour is founded on the conviction that meaningful dialogue can transform suspicion into understanding, indifference into friendship, and differences into opportunities for learning. Religious harmony does not require us to abandon our distinctive beliefs or traditions. Rather, it invites us to appreciate the values we share while respecting the convictions that make each tradition unique.

From the perspective of Sanatan Dharma, the recognition of a deeper spiritual kinship among living beings provides a powerful foundation for harmony. The Bhagavad-gita (5.18) describes the wise as seeing with equal vision, recognising the spiritual worth of all beings beyond external distinctions. This vision encourages us to look beyond labels of religion,



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caste, community and social status, and to approach every individual with dignity and compassion. When we learn to see one another not merely as members of different communities but as fellow human beings deserving of respect, the foundations of genuine peace begin to emerge.

However, harmony cannot remain an attractive ideal expressed only at public gatherings. It must find expression in our everyday conduct—in the language we use, the stories we share, the relationships we nurture and the choices we make. It requires us to resist rumours, reject hate speech, challenge prejudice and refuse to be manipulated by forces that thrive on division. It calls upon religious leaders to emphasise the noblest teachings of their traditions and to ensure that faith becomes a source of healing rather than hostility.

Interfaith engagement must also move beyond dialogue towards collaboration. When communities come together to feed the hungry, care for the vulnerable, protect the environment, support young people and respond to human suffering, they discover the transformative power of shared service. Such initiatives demonstrate that our common humanity is not merely a philosophical concept; it is a responsibility that we can fulfil together. They also create lasting relationships of trust that can help communities withstand moments of tension and uncertainty.

The theme of the Mumbai Parliament of Religions, "The Courage to Live Together," is particularly relevant to our times. It reminds us that harmony requires courage: the courage to listen when we disagree, to stand against injustice even when it is uncomfortable, to acknowledge the dignity of those who are different from us, and to choose reconciliation over retaliation. Peace is not passive silence in the face of wrongdoing; it is the active pursuit of justice, dignity and mutual understanding.



As IRSC brings out its inaugural newsletter, we hope it will become a meaningful platform for sharing ideas, experiences and initiatives that strengthen the bonds between our diverse communities. May it inspire us to move from dialogue to friendship, from friendship to cooperation, and from cooperation to collective service. Ultimately, the measure of our spirituality is not simply how deeply we practise our own faith, but also how that faith enables us to treat others—with kindness, humility, fairness and love. Let us work together to build a Mumbai, an India and a world where every faith community can flourish in freedom and dignity, and where our differences become bridges of understanding rather than walls of separation.

Let us have the courage not merely to live alongside one another, but to learn, serve and flourish together.

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Maharashtra's Freedom of Religion Act: A Concern for Voluntary Faith, Constitutional Freedoms, and Social Harmony

The Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Act 2026 (Anti-Conversion Act) is now in force : the Act which is intended to address forced and fraudulent conversions has raised concerns among civil society organisations, women's groups and marginalised communities across religions. Critics believe the Act could create an extensive system of state oversight over personal faith, marriage and voluntary choice.

Religious & Moral leaders like Gandhiji have always believed that Faith is strongest when freely chosen, as a voluntary submission to God rather than something imposed by birth or pressure and that the aim of humanity should be that every person becomes a better follower of the Faith they freely choose. It is for this very reason that IRSC has always held that conversion must spring from genuine personal conviction, never from inducement, deceit or mass campaigns. This Act appears to be at odds with these principles.

A law without publicly available data

The Bill was introduced in the Maharashtra Legislature without prior public consultation and the government has not placed in the public domain any data showing widespread forced or fraudulent conversions in Maharashtra or explaining why existing criminal laws were inadequate to address any current issues.

Intrusion into voluntary choice

The Act imposes additional procedural requirements on anyone wishing to change their religion. These include need for advance notice, mandatory declarations and post-conversion reporting. A matter of individual conscience between a person and God thus becomes a regulated activity, potentially exposing citizens to public disclosure, social pressure and possible harassment from private groups.

Particularly concerning are provisions allowing complaints by relatives and others, which could create opportunities for misuse in cases involving interfaith relationships and marriages. Offences are cognizable and non-bailable, so even consenting adults may face criminal proceedings.

Impacts all Religions with disproportionate impact on certain sections

A common perception is that the Act largely impacts only the minorities but in reality it impacts all religions by affecting voluntary choice of individuals. In particular the Act disproportionately affects women, young adults, Dalits and Adivasis. It may undermine the autonomy and dignity of women and appears to proceed on the assumption that women lack agency of their own and that people from SC and ST communities are being converted on a mass scale through deceit, a claim for which no evidence has been presented. Prominent leaders from the Community have already opposed the Act and Prakash Ambedkar of the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi has announced a Bombay High Court challenge

Constitutional Concerns

Critics argue the Act is inconsistent with Article 25 (freedom of religion), Articles 14 and 21 (equality and personal liberty), and the right to privacy recognised in Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, which protects personal choices about marriage, family and belief.

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Maharashtra's Freedom of Religion Act: A Concern for Voluntary Faith, Constitutional Freedoms, and Social Harmony Contd....

Risk to communal harmony

The law also risks deepening communal divisions by reinforcing narratives around large-scale fraudulent conversions and so-called "love jihad", neither of which has an established legal or factual basis.

Mahatma Gandhi on voluntary faith

Mahatma Gandhi believed that faith is a personal matter rooted in individual conscience and that individuals should try to be better followers of their own religion. He however acknowledged an individual's freedom to change their religion while insisting that genuine conversion must arise from inner conviction

Gandhiji wrote:

- "It is a highly personal matter for the individual and his God." — Harijan, 9 September 1935.
- "It is open to any person of mature age to change his or her faith when and as often as he or she wishes." — Tirupur, 19 March 1925.

Gandhiji's position offers an important moral perspective on the Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Act, 2026. While preventing coercion and fraud is a legitimate objective, safeguards against unlawful conversion should not become instruments for intimidating people who freely choose their faith and result in deepening communal divides. Laws intended to protect freedom of religion should take care not to undermine the very freedom and voluntary choice they seek to safeguard.

Statement of the Mumbai Parliament of Religions 2026
The Courage to Live Together - 31 October 2026 | Mumbai

The Inter-Religious Solidarity Council (IRSC), in association with the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), convened the Mumbai Parliament of Religions 2026 under the theme "The Courage to Live Together." Bringing together scholars, civil society representatives, religious leaders and citizens, the Parliament reflected on religious polarisation and the possibilities for building a more just, compassionate and inclusive society.

Inspired by Swami Vivekananda's message of religious acceptance at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, we reaffirm that India's religious, cultural and philosophical plurality is integral to our shared heritage. Living together requires more than tolerance. It calls for mutual respect, equal dignity, meaningful relationships and the courage to stand up for one another when rights and freedoms are threatened.

The Parliament recognised that religious polarisation is sustained through prejudice, distorted historical narratives, misinformation, social segregation and the creation of fear and mistrust. Discrimination based on religion, caste, gender, sexuality and other identities undermines the constitutional promise of equality and fraternity.

We affirm that every person, whether religious or non-religious, has an equal claim to dignity, freedom of conscience, security and belonging. Different religious and philosophical worldviews can coexist without agreement on ultimate truths. Our shared social world demands mutual trustworthiness, ethical responsibility and respect for the rights of others.

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The discussions highlighted the need for critical examination within religious communities. Traditions that offer profound teachings on compassion, justice and non-violence must also confront practices and interpretations that perpetuate caste hierarchies, patriarchy, exclusion and hostility towards dissent. Anti-caste perspectives are essential to any meaningful engagement with religion and social justice. The use of religion to legitimise discrimination, hostility or violence against LGBTQIA+ people, including mobilisation against their equal rights and relationships, demands particular scrutiny. Religious freedom carries with it the responsibility to respect the dignity and freedoms of others.

The Parliament emphasised that unity does not require uniformity, and that peace cannot depend upon avoiding difficult conversations. Dialogue may bring discomfort, yet such encounters are necessary for challenging assumptions, addressing historical injustices and strengthening relationships across community boundaries.

In this spirit, we call upon religious communities, civil society organisations, educational institutions, the media, public authorities and citizens to:

1. Challenge prejudice and hatred wherever they arise, including within families, neighbourhoods, religious institutions and digital spaces, and stand in solidarity with those facing discrimination or violence.
2. Uphold constitutional values of equality, liberty, fraternity and freedom of conscience, including the rights and dignity of Dalit, Adivasi, LGBTQIA+ and other historically marginalised communities.
3. Create sustained spaces for interreligious encounter, particularly among young people, through shared meals, cultural exchanges, neighbourhood initiatives, educational programmes and visits to one another's community spaces.
4. Strengthen responsible public narratives by challenging misinformation, recognising India's histories of religious coexistence, and amplifying voices working for peace, including women, young people and marginalised communities.
5. Encourage local interfaith committees and collaborative initiatives to address shared concerns, including caste discrimination, poverty, social exclusion, ecological degradation and neighbourhood tensions.
6. Organise for peace, supporting sustained relationships, collective action and institutions capable of responding to polarisation, injustice and conflict.

The Parliament also acknowledged the importance of extending compassion and ethical responsibility towards the wider living world.

IRSC commits to carrying forward the conversations and proposals emerging from this gathering, encouraging collaboration among religious and civil society institutions and sharing its learnings with others seeking to strengthen interreligious solidarity.

The courage to live together is expressed through our everyday choices: to question prejudice, protect one another's dignity, remain in dialogue across differences and act together for the common good.

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