

VATICAN, CHURCHES WORK ON CONVERSION PLAN

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Note from pastor Kevin Lea:

The Bible teaches that in the last days there will be one more attempt at "world government" (book of Daniel). A world government needs a world religion, which is also alluded to in the prophetic scriptures of the Bible (book of Revelation).

It is becoming obvious that powerful think-tank groups are trying to get all the various religious groups to lay down their proselytizing swords and chant, "Can't we all just get along?" as they join the Rodney King club. True Christians will never join this club, since we know that Jesus is the only way, the only truth and the only life – that no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

ATHENS, Greece -- The Vatican and the world's largest alliance of Christian churches plan to seek a common code for religious conversions, a leader of the effort said Wednesday. The groups also will open contacts with Islam and other faiths to study ways to avoid conflicts.

Religious freedom and missionary outreach by Christian groups have become increasingly sensitive topics as many Muslims perceive their faith as under threat by the West and nations such as China struggle to maintain state controls on churches.

"How can we - anxious to maintain, develop and nurture good relations with people of other faiths - deal with this highly complex issue that sometimes threatens the fiber of living together?" said the Rev. Hans Ucko, head of the interreligious relations office for the World Council of Churches.

Envoys from the Vatican's office on interreligious dialogue and the Geneva-based WCC - which includes more than 350 mainline Protestant, Orthodox and related churches - are scheduled to open a four-day conference Friday near Rome to sketch out the broad outlines toward an eventual "code of conduct" on Christian conversions. The document could take at least three years to research and draft.

Members of other faiths, including Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, also plan to attend the meeting in Velletri, about 25 miles southeast of Rome. The biggest challenges to the project will be highlighted by who will be absent: Pentecostal and evangelical-style congregations that often lead the drive for conversions around the world and represent the fastest-growing bloc in Christianity.

The WCC maintains links with some groups, including the 50 million-member Assemblies of God churches and the World Evangelical Alliance. Ucko said leaders hope to use the contacts to talk more with "the most zealous groups to try to find a common voice."

The details of the conversion code will take shape in the coming years, said Ucko, but it will explore "the dos and don'ts" of trying to spread Christianity among other faiths - including places in the Muslim world where conversion from Islam is a punishable offense.

"This is complex moral and ethical territory. We want to open up a space to talk about this with other faiths," said Ucko in a telephone interview. "What are the limits on seeking new Christians? What about people who have converted, but are afraid to come forward because they could be persecuted?" Such questions took a global stage earlier this year with the arrest of Abdul Raman, a Christian convert from Islam who faced a possible death sentence in Afghanistan before the charges were dropped in March. Rahman ultimately was granted asylum in Italy, while the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom added Afghanistan to its "watch list."

Last month, lawmakers in the western Indian state of Rajasthan became the latest region in the country to outlaw proselytizing with punishments up to five years in prison. Critics claim the laws will be used to target Christian missionaries, who are often the target of denunciations from Hindu nationalists.

But Muslims - who account for about 14 percent of India's population - also say the measures could be used against them. The discussions over conversions could also spill into the religious politics of Asia, including the alleged persecution of "house churches" in places such as Vietnam and the escalating clash between the Vatican and Chinese authorities over the allegiance of Catholics. Chinese Catholics must worship in the state-approved church, which doesn't recognize the Vatican.

Last week, China angered the Vatican by ordaining two bishops without the approval of Pope Benedict XVI. The Vatican warned that those who took part might face excommunication.

The WCC represents more than 500 million Christians worldwide. The

Roman Catholic Church, with about 1.1 billion members, is not a WCC member, but cooperates closely on many levels.