ICP Lecture on 12th July, 2016

Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Contemporary France: Challenges and Opportunities

Report by - Victor Edwin SJ

Prof. Marc Rastoin SJ, Advisor to the General of the Jesuits on Jewish Christian affairs, delivered a lecture on "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Contemporary France: Challenges and Opportunities" at CISRS House on 12 July 2016.

In his lecture, Prof. Rastoin pointed out, firstly, that 'how to be a religious in a non-religious secular society' is a critical challenge for observant Jews, Christians and Muslims in France. French secularism does not allow religious affairs to influence policy decisions of the government. Religion is pushed to the private domain.

Secondly, French citizens by and large distanced themselves from the Catholic Church. Today, 59% of French citizens claim to be Catholic Christians. However, a much smaller minority practices Catholic faith. In this context, Prof. Rastoin remarked that 'how to be an active minority among people of different religions without isolating themselves' is another crucial issue before French Catholics.

Thirdly, France hosts the third largest Jewish community in the world. Jews in France number around six hundred thousand. A disturbing trend, Prof. Rastoin said is the 'Israelisation of Jews'. A good number of Jews leave for Israel, and others who remain back in France tend to develop a narrow mindset against other minorities.

Fourthly, Muslims form around 8 to 10% of the French population. There is certain isolation or ghettoization of Muslims, especially the poor sections. A greater integration is another challenge before the French citizens.

Prof. Rastoin noted that Christian-Jewish dialogue is well organized and a number of initiative have been undertaken by both the Catholic Church and Jewish groups. However, Jewish-Muslim dialogue is a much difficult task. Prof. Rastoin felt that Christian involvement in Jewish-Muslim dialogue can help bring about desired results. It is important to recognize that dialogue between the members of the three Abrahamic families, Christians, Muslims and Jews, is the need of the hour in France.

Dr. Zafar Mahmood, the director of Interfaith Coalition for Peace, organised this lecture. A good number of Christians and Muslims participated in the meeting.