

European Parliament: HRWF debate on child marriage on EU REPORTER TV

– Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/wg0K0_XA6Vg

Panelists

Elisa Van Ruiten, a Gender Specialist at Human Rights Without Frontiers International;

Mohinder Watson, a researcher and activist against child marriage, who escaped a forced marriage of her own as a teenager;

Emilio Puccio, the Coordinator of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights, which is a cross-party and cross-national group comprising over 90 MEPs and 25 child-focused organizations.

The presenter was EU Reporter's Jim Gibbons.

“Every day somewhere in the world, 39,000 young girls are married before they reach the age of majority; more than a third of them are younger than 15, according to the Council of Europe. We may be well into the 21st century but too many girls are still forced to live in a bygone age of male dominance. Human Rights Without Frontiers has just produced a report on women's rights and the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.”

EU Reporter – <https://bit.ly/2CTvNPh>

Next Programme about North Korea (November) –

IF YOU WANT TO BE A PARTNER OF HUMAN RIGHTS WITHOUT FRONTIERS IN AN EU REPORTER TV PROGRAM OF YOUR CHOICE, SEND AN EMAIL TO

w.fautre@hrwf.org

CHINA: The Church of Almighty God: Over 25 years of persecution

– Religious refugees from China should not be sent back to their country where they would be at risk of being arrested and tortured, sometimes to death. They should be granted political asylum –

HRWF (15.10.2018) – On March 27, 1991, Chen Jun and 13 other Christians from Henan Province went to the city of Harbin in Heilongjiang Province for a religious gathering. They were arrested on their way back and were held in the Henan Labor Camp for two years. Chen Jun was brutally tortured by the police in the labor camp resulting in serious health problems but was denied access to medical care. After his release, he was arrested twice more, and his health condition grew worse and worse. In September 1996, he was brutalized to death by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He was then only 46 years old.

More than 20 years later, Ms Zhang Xiaoyue, who was born in 1964 and lived in Sankou (Anhui Province), started believing in the message of Jesus Christ in 1996 and joined The Church of Almighty God (CAG) one year later. On September 2, 2014, Zhang Xiaoyue was arrested by the police of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) because she was practising her faith in The Church of Almighty God. She was sentenced to three years in prison. The prison guards deprived her of sleep, food and drinks, and had her tortured by her inmates because she refused to recant her faith. She died from their treatment. She was then 50.

During that period and afterwards, hundreds of Christians belonging to The Church of Almighty God were tortured to death. See our report "Tortured to Death" at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/our-reports/>

CHEN JUN, A CHRISTIAN, DIED FROM THE CCP'S RE-EDUCATION THROUGH FORCED LABOR

Condemned as a counterrevolutionary for believing in God—Arrested, tortured, and paraded through the streets

On March 27, 1991, Chen Jun and 13 other Christians went to Yongyuan Town in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province to attend a one-week religious gathering. On his way back, Chen Jun was carrying about 200 copies of spiritual books when he was arrested by the police at the train station and sent to a local detention center.

At that time it was only 4 or 5 degrees Celsius (about 40 degrees Fahrenheit) in Heilongjiang. The police handcuffed his arms behind his back on a concrete column and continually poured cold water over his head, his body, and into his boots. They forced him to sit cross-legged on a cold wooden floor for 33 days in a row and did not allow him to move. When he did, even a little bit, they would punch and kick him, leaving the skin of his ankles peeling off, and even instructed other prisoners to beat him.

On April 8, 1991, the government of Yongyuan Town in Harbin City, Heilongjiang Province hung signs on Chen Jun and the other thirteen Christians and paraded them through the streets for the crimes of "being anti-Party, counterrevolutionary, anti-humanity, anti-government, and attempting to overthrow the regime." Thirty-three days later, Chen Jun was transferred to the Yongcheng City Public Security Bureau in Henan Province and the other 13 were sent to a local facility for detention.

In late June 1991, Public Security Bureau staff tried to blackmail Chen Jun's family for 7,000 RMB, but they barely had enough to make ends meet and could not come up with the money. On July 6, 1991, two officers of the Yongcheng National

Security Brigade took Chen Jun back home. His wife saw her husband's face was pale and gaunt, and he even lacked the strength to walk. The officers exploited that opportunity to extort 350 RMB from her and told her: "If you continue to believe in God, your children will suffer. They won't be able to join the military or get into college in future." She had no choice but to give the two children's tuition and all of their living expenses to the police (she was not given a receipt). But after taking the money, they took Chen Jun back to the Yongcheng Public Security Bureau.

Incredible torture over two years of forced labor

On July 7, 1991, the Yongcheng Public Security Bureau sentenced Chen Jun to two years of hard labor for "disrupting social order, being counterrevolutionary, anti-Party, anti-government, and subverting state power." They used a coal truck to secretly take him to the labor re-education camp in Henan Province's Shangqiu City without telling anything to his family. His wife did not find out until late August.

The guards in the labor camp frequently told the other prisoners to punch and kick Chen Jun and snatch his food. He became unbearably hungry. He had to salvage others' leftover steamed buns from trash cans to take the edge off his hunger. On top of that, he was forced to do very hard labor such as carrying cement. Over time, carrying such heavy loads caused him to become extremely weak.

One day, in August 1992, Chen Jun's wife visited him and saw that his face and body were swollen. He told her that he could no longer carry cement because he had gotten enteritis and the police forced him to peel garlic every day. If he did not complete a certain amount per day, he was not allowed to eat or sleep. Layers of skin came off his fingers, but he had no other choice than to tolerate the pain and to continue working...

In late August 1993, Chen Jun was released at the end of his prison term. A medical exam showed that he had gotten

hepatitis with jaundice. Because he had not received timely treatment in prison, there was serious swelling in his entire body. He was lacking strength, and had completely lost the ability to do any labor. However, the police still required him to report to the Mangshan Town government once a month and he was also forced to undergo re-education. His condition grew much more serious during that time. His family sold all of their valuable possessions to pay for his treatment and borrowed over 8,000 RMB from others. They were in dire straits.

Repeated arrests and persecuted to death

One day in March 1994, at past 12 a.m., three officers from the Mangshan Police Station suddenly came to Chen Jun's home and without showing any paperwork wantonly searched the house. They came up empty-handed, but arrested Chen Jun again on the alleged ground that someone had reported he had been spreading the gospel. They detained him in a local detention facility. While he was locked up, the police extorted over 100 RMB from his family. After 17 days they saw that his condition had become very serious and feared being held responsible. They then released him to avoid any trouble.

One day in March 1995, during the night, two officers from the Mangshan Police Station jumped over a wall to enter the courtyard of Chen's home and forcibly took him to the station although he was seriously weak. The next morning, they saw that he was incurably ill and he could die at any moment. Only then they agreed to send him home, warning him not to practice his faith any longer.

In late 1995, Chen Jun became bedridden as a consequence of the Chinese Communist Party's unrelenting persecution. He passed away on September 19, 1996 at the age of 46.

CHRISTIAN ZHANG XIAOYUE DIED FROM FOOD DEPRIVATION AND BEATINGS FOR KEEPING HER FAITH

Ms Zhang Xiaoyue, who was born in 1964 and lived in Sankou

(Huangshan City, Huangshan District, Anhui Province), started believing in the message of Jesus Christ in 1996 and joined The Church of Almighty God (CAG) one year later.

On September 2, 2014, Zhang Xiaoyue was arrested by the police of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) because she was practising her faith in The Church of Almighty God. She was sentenced to three years in prison and was killed while serving her sentence. She was then 50. Below is Zhang's story of her persecution to death.

Around 5 a.m. on September 2, 2014, the police from Huangshan District, Huangshan City (Anhui Province) carried out a concerted operation resulting in the arrest of five local Christians from The Church of Almighty God. Zhang Xiaoyue was one of them.

At about 8 a.m. that morning, Zhang Xiaoyue's mother went to her home but saw no sign of her. Later on, she received a phone call informing her that Ms Li Ru (alias), a Christian from the same Church, had been arrested because of her beliefs in the teachings of The Church of Almighty God and the police had confiscated a lot of spiritual books found in her house. After this call, she rushed to her daughter's house to look for her again and discovered that all her spiritual books had disappeared. She figured out that her daughter had also been arrested by the police.

Three or four days later, Yu Zhe, a village cadre, went with two police officers to Zhang Xiaoyue's mother's home and said to her, "Your daughter has been arrested and is being held in a detention center because of her beliefs in The Church of Almighty God. Take some clothing for her."

Zhang Xiaoyue's mother became extremely anxious and angrily asked them, "My daughter's faith does not break any law. Why did you arrest her? She has cerebral atrophy. By arresting her, aren't you putting her on a path to death?" But the

police had no compassion for her and yelled at her, "Your daughter believes in Almighty God, and this is forbidden in China. Her faith is against the law, and she's even preaching the gospel all over the place. We don't care whether she has any kind of disease or not. Everyone who believes in Almighty God must be arrested!" Her mother then collected some clothing to bring to her but she was not allowed to see her.

A month later, Yu Zhe, the village cadre, once again asked Zhang Xiaoyue's mother to bring her some winter clothing. She took some warm clothes and went to the Huangshan District Public Security Bureau. The police told her that Zhang Xiaoyue had been given a 3-year sentence for "using a xie jiao organization to undermine the enforcement of the law." However, they only gave her the arrest notice, not the verdict. Zhang Xiaoyue was later transferred to the Changfeng County Women's Prison, Anhui Province to serve her sentence.

One day in December of 2015, at 3 a.m. Zhang Xiaoyue's elder brother received a phone call from the prison saying that she had a serious, life-threatening illness and asking him to take her back home. Zhang's brother and husband rushed to the prison but when they arrived, the staff told them that Zhang Xiaoyue had already died. Zhang's family made a request to see her corpse. After her family had identified her remains, the prison guards immediately removed her body for cremation. Her family later took her ashes to their hometown for burial.

According to another Christian who was in prison with Zhang Xiaoyue, the guards pressed her to give up her faith and sign three statements (a guarantee, a statement of severing ties with the Church, and a statement of remorse), but she staunchly refused.

The guards then refused to give her anything to eat or drink and ordered the four prisoners sharing her cell to impose their sanctions on her if they did not want to lose points on their behavior card (the attribution of points determines when

a prisoner can be released). As they did not want to lose such precious points, the other detainees took turns watching over her day and night.

Because of previous maltreatments, Zhang Xiaoyue was not in good health and could not even walk. Every time she attended an indoctrination class several people had to carry her to the classroom. A prison guard also said that if Zhang Xiaoyue did not sign the three statements, everyone in the cell would lose points and would be hereby penalized. This fanned the flames of the other prisoners' hatred towards her. They severely beat her, stuffed their shoes into her mouth, hit her in her chest with plastic stools, and forced long-handled shoe brushes into her vagina.

One night in December 2015, Zhang Xiaoyue suddenly started coughing up and defecating blood. The prison guards finally decided to send her to the prison hospital but in an early morning, she passed away in the prison. The guards later spread rumors slandering her, saying that because of her faith she had become possessed by the devil and had harmed herself to the point of death.

Vatican signs a 'provisional agreement' with China

– Contrary to exaggerated expectations, the Vatican-China agreement has a limited scope—but is described as “the first step in a process” – MASSIMO INTROVIGNE –

Bitter Winter (22.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2017vb2> – On Saturday, September 22, the Vatican announced that it has signed in Beijing a “provisional agreement” with the Chinese

government, dealing with the appointment of Catholic bishops in China, whose details remain secret. The international edition of the Chinese official People's Daily first denied that a Vatican delegation was visiting Beijing, then after the Vatican's official announcement—mentioning China's deputy Foreign Minister Wang Chao as the Chinese party who signed it—had to admit that a confidential agreement had been signed. The curious behavior of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) media confirms that there are opponents of the agreement within the CCP itself.

The Vatican press release reads as follows:

“Today, 22nd September 2018, within the framework of the contacts between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China that have been underway for some time in order to discuss Church matters of common interest and to promote further understanding, a meeting was held in Beijing between Mgr Antoine Camilleri, Undersecretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, and H. E. Mr Wang Chao, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, respectively heads of the Vatican and Chinese delegations.

During that meeting, the two representatives signed a Provisional Agreement on the appointment of Bishops.

The above-mentioned Provisional Agreement, which is the fruit of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement, has been agreed following a long process of careful negotiation and foresees the possibility of periodic reviews of its application. It concerns the nomination of Bishops, a question of great importance for the life of the Church, and creates the conditions for greater collaboration at the bilateral level.

The shared hope is that this agreement may favour a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China, to the common good of the Chinese people and to peace

in the world.”

Earlier this week, The Wall Street Journal anticipated a much broader agreement, for which, as Bitter Winter reported, the Beijing authorities were not prepared.

What really happened may be summarized as follows:

1. The CCP favored in 1957 the birth of a “Patriotic Catholic Church,” with bishops theoretically “elected” by the local Catholics but in fact appointed by the CCP rather than by the Vatican, part of the “red market” of the government-controlled religions in China. The Vatican declared this “Patriotic Church” schismatic and excommunicated its bishops, recognizing in China as truly Catholic only an “underground” Catholic Church, with bishops appointed by the Vatican, which was heavily persecuted by the regime.

2. Since the pontificate of Benedict XVI, and in some instances even earlier, the Vatican and the CCP agreed on the appointments of local bishops, which were both selected by the CCP and recognized by the Vatican. The two Catholic Churches, the official and the “Patriotic,” did not merge but in many dioceses had the same bishops.

3. This happened in a number of dioceses, while in others the Vatican had strong objections against the bishops selected by the CCP and any agreement proved impossible.

4. What happens with the new agreement, although the details are secret, is that the Vatican and the CCP have agreed to solve the existing problems and to establish a (secret) process to identify together the future bishops of all Chinese dioceses. According to a message of the Vatican’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the problems have indeed been solved for all the dioceses where previously there was no agreement, as he announced that “today, for the first time, all the Bishops in China are in communion with the Bishop of Rome,” i.e. with Pope Francis and the Holy See.

5. What is not happening, contrary to exaggerated expectations or fears, is the exchange of diplomatic recognitions between

the Holy See and China, which would also mean that the Vatican should terminate its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan—the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry rushed to publish a note explaining that this is not the case.

6. There is no announcement that the underground and the “Patriotic” churches will merge (which was and is opposed by the top leaders of the Patriotic Church and their supporters in the CCP). Immediately, what we may expect is a gradual extension to all dioceses of the situation already existing in many of them, where the two structures are personally connected by having the same bishop at the top.

7. Clearly, in the medium or long term, this process will probably lead to the merging of the two churches, but this requires the negotiation of many further details. Pope Francis’ Vatican has a style of “starting processes” rather than concluding them, and this is yet another example of this strategy.

8. Conservative Catholics, including some in China and Hong Kong, are screaming against the “sell-out” of the Catholic Church to CCP. Their position and concerns are understandable. However, with the new law which came into force on February 1, 2018, the alternative for the “underground” Catholic Church was to come to an agreement with the CCP or being wiped out and heavily persecuted. The “underground” Catholic Church is part of a “gray market” of religion President Xi Jinping vowed to eliminate. While most Protestant house churches, also part of the “gray market,” do not have the possibility of coming to similar agreements, the Vatican is both a religious organization and a State. It obviously believes it is in a unique position to find an accommodation that would avoid the persecution and secure a modicum of religious freedom for Catholics in China. The Vatican, after its experience in countries such as Poland or Lithuania, also believes that these agreements offer to it a latitude to operate openly within Communist societies, and subtly influence their transformation from inside. Whether this is a realistic perspective or a dangerous illusion, time will tell. But this

is the very reason while sectors of the CCP oppose the agreement and, rather than a global, final, and public treaty with the Vatican, so far what we have is a partial, provisional, and secret one.

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist and intellectual property consultant. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of tens of books and articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion.[1] and of the executive board of University of California Press' Nova Religio.[2] He is also a consultant on intellectual property rights.[3] From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In June 2012, he was appointed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as chairperson of the newly instituted Observatory of Religious Liberty, created by the Ministry in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

**CHINA: False demonstrations
against the Church of**

Almighty God refugees start in South Korea

= Executing a secret plan that Bitter Winter revealed one month ago, the CCP brings to Korea relatives of asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God and organizes false "spontaneous demonstrations" with the help of pro-Chinese anti-cult activists. =

Bitter Winter (31.08.2018) – <http://www.bitterwinter.org> – On August 4, 2018, Bitter Winter published a secret document by the Chinese Communist Party calling for harassment in South Korea of the asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Chinese Christian new religious movement heavily persecuted in China. The CCP called for the recruitment of the relatives of the asylum seekers who still live in China, if necessary through threats and coercion, who would then call for the "return home" of the refugees (who obviously would not return "home" but, once in China, will be arrested and will thus "return" to jail). The plan also sought the cooperation of pro-Chinese activists in South Korea and anti-cultists hostile to the CAG.

Bitter Winter has now learned that the CCP's plan is being put into execution. On August 27, Ms. O Myung-ok (오명옥 Wu Mingyu), a pro-Chinese and anti-CAG activist, published several reports on some pro-Chinese and/or anti-cult Korean media, including Religion and Truth, releasing fake news claiming that CAG members are false refugees and are abusing the refugee system, and that the belief in Almighty God leads to family disruption. These reports strongly called for the deportation of CAG members back to China.

As these media disclosed, between August 30 and September 4, more than 50 people, including a dozen of family members of CAG refugees who are in Korea, and congregants from five

Korean Christian groups active in campaigns against “cults,” will demonstrate against the CAG outside the Jeju court, Jeju Parliament, the CAG community in Onsu, the CAG worship building (i.e. the place where CAG members offer prayers regularly), the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the executive office and official residence of the South Korean head of state, the President of the Republic of Korea), and other places. They held a press conference on August 31 as well. All this information has been confirmed by confidential sources in Korea and by CAG members Bitter Winter interviewed.

On the afternoon of August 30, one CAG member learned from his mother, who currently lives in China, that CCP officers had gone to his family two months ago, asking his relatives to cooperate with them by going to Korea to get him back to China. At a rough estimate, more than 10 relatives of CAG members were requested by the CCP to do the same thing. The CCP especially opened a WeChat account to have frequent discussions with them about this. This member’s mother also told him that his elder sister and her husband were on the way to Jeju with governmental staff members. They were asked to stay in South Korea for as long as possible. His mother insisted, “Things are getting serious. You’d better come back with them, or else we’ll get into big trouble.”

Another Korean CAG member and her husband, who are Korean Chinese, fled to Korea because of the CCP’s persecution in China. On August 29, when she made a phone call to her mother, who lives in China, she was told that her mother and cousin (male) would come to Korea to visit her and that they were waiting for the plane flying to Jeju at the moment. The CAG member told her mother that they live in Seoul and asked her to fly to Seoul directly. But her mother said she couldn’t do that since they had to stay in Jeju for two days and then go to Seoul later as scheduled, and that their hotel rooms in Jeju had already been booked. The CAG member noticed that her mother hesitated over talking and even left to her cousin the

conversation when she couldn't make herself clear. It is important to note that this cousin is working for a governmental television station in China.

On the afternoon of August 30, Ms. O Myung-ok went to the airport to pick up five cameramen (three males and two females) flying from Seoul. As far as we have learned, some 15 Chinese relatives had arrived in Jeju, while Chinese officers are also coming to Korea to direct the campaign on site. According to their agenda, on August 31 and September 1, they will stage demonstrations at the Jeju court and the Parliament building and organize press conferences; they will stage demonstrations at the CAG community in Onsu on September 2, at the Blue House on September 3, and at the CAG worship building on September 4 respectively.

When CAG refugees learned that their family members were coming to Korea, they asked to meet them as soon as possible. So The Church of Almighty God contacted the Korean police on their behalf, asking for help to arrange meetings with their family members. When the police contacted Ms. O Myung-ok, she said she couldn't let them meet each other until they finish the demonstrations and press conferences.

We have learned from informed Korean sources that Ms. O and the CCP claim that The Church of Almighty God is trying to prevent its members to meet their relatives coming from China to Korea. This is not the case, and in fact, it is Ms. O who is preventing the relatives to meet the CAG members. Obviously, the CCP and the anti-cultists are interested in their propaganda rather than in the welfare of the families.

Nine international NGOs specialized in the defense of religious liberty, including CAP-LC, which has consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC, have signed an appeal (below), dated August 31, to end this ruthless persecution of harmless refugees, strongly condemning the actions of both the CCP and the Korean anti-cultists.

SYRIA: Over 1.5 million refugees return home, according to Russian UN Envoy – Fake news or hidden news?

– By Willy Fautré –

– HRWF (25.08.2018) – European media repeatedly point at the decrease of refugees from Syria as if it were the work of the EU and the heads of EU member states but is it? Russia and Turkey also claim in their media that this decline is the result of their policies.

On 23 August, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya announced that “more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have returned to their homes as 96% of Syria’s territory has been liberated from terrorists thanks to the efforts of the Syrian army backed by the Russian taskforce.”

“More than 1,400 populated localities in Syria have been liberated from terrorists and more than 96% of its territory has come under control of government troops and militias thanks to the support from the Russian armed forces,” he said at a United Nations Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and stability coming from terrorism.

“As a result, more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have been able to return to their homeland,” he stressed.

Last week, Russian President’s Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin visited Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to discuss

the problem of Syrian refugees. After the visit, Lavrentyev told TASS that the Russian side had invited Turkey to organize regular work to promote the process of the return of Syrian refugees to the places of their permanent residence. It was announced that Moscow and Ankara are interested in cooperating in creating conditions for the safe return of Syrian nationals to their home country.

Fake news?

Of course, it would be politically uncomfortable to credit Moscow and Ankara with the sharp decline in the EU of the number of migrants from Syria and to recognize the pragmatic results of Putin's policy in the Astana process in which the West had no say.

If it is not true, Juncker and Western heads of state should denounce such a fake news but they still do not. The ball is now in the court of Brussels.

Towards a new constitution in Syria backed by Moscow

About the discussions between Moscow and Ankara, Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was quoted as saying by TASS: "We focused on the situation in Syria, including the implementation of agreements reached at the Astana-format summits, high-level and expert meetings, as well as the execution of decisions made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, which relate to the formation of a constitutional committee."

Participants in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on January 30, decided to establish a constitutional committee that will work on the country's new constitution. The full candidate list will comprise 150 people, including 100 representatives of the Syrian government and domestic opposition, as well as 50 members of the foreign-based opposition. The UN envoy suggested that the committee should consist of no more than 50

members.

Humanitarian aid from Russia

A public-opinion poll conducted in Russia in late 2017 revealed that 73 percent of the country's citizens consider it necessary to continue helping Syria after the end of the current conflict. An even larger proportion of respondents – 75 percent – said that they would like to see Russia continue sending humanitarian aid to Syria.

A few days ago, Central Muslim Spiritual Board chairman and Russian Chief Mufti Talgat Tajuddin called on the international community to provide humanitarian aid to Syria.

“We are calling on all peoples and countries of the world, primarily Arab and Muslim countries, to extend humanitarian aid to the people of Syria who have suffered from the atrocities of international terrorism and also refugees who are returning to their home country,” he said during a sermon on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday, also known as the “Festival of Sacrifice”, at the Lala Tulpan (Tulip in Bloom) mosque in Ufa on 21 August.

The Muslim community takes pride in the fact that “our country has been providing genuine assistance to the fraternal people of Syria in order to repel the aggression of terrorism and restore peaceful life on this land,” he said.

The Russian chief mufti also criticized those who apply double standards and “try to take advantage of any occasion to pit peoples and states against each other, those who, while welcoming the fight against terrorism, are using it only in their own interests.” (Interfax-religion.com, 21 August 2018)

Putin the Savior of Christians in Syria?

Putin wants to appear as the Savior of Christians in Syria while the EU and most EU member states are reluctant to side

with the local historical Christian minorities. In an article entitled "Moscow Patriarchate promotes the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East", published in Eurasia Daily Monitor on 12 December 2017 (<http://bit.ly/2nUW74J>), Paul Goble writes:

"The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is intensifying its efforts to promote the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East. Although the Church, either directly or as a cover for Soviet and Russian security agencies, has long been active in that region-the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is the only Russian post there that lasted from Imperial times through Soviet ones to the present (<http://bit.ly/2CbKHYM> Mospat.ru, October 11; <http://bit.ly/2CemnKD> Portal-credo.ru, December 9) the Moscow Patriarchate is now expanding its efforts. These activities help Vladimir Putin in his drive to expand Russian influence in the Middle East, given the waning of US power there (see <http://bit.ly/2nX4Q6h> Jamestown.org, October 5). At the same time, they ensure that Orthodox Churches in the region will continue to back the Moscow Patriarchate against the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople on issues like autocephaly for Ukraine and the Moscow Patriarchate's claim of "canonical territory" over the entire former Soviet space.

The Kremlin is currently convinced it can fill the niche that Washington had in the Middle East for three reasons: First, as Putin's recent visit to the region shows (<http://bit.ly/2AkuIuz> Kremlin.ru, December 11), the perception of victory of Russian forces over the Islamic State in Syria as well as Moscow's successful backing of President Bashar al-Assad are popular. Second, the Russian president has presented himself as the chief defender of Christians in the region, something popular even among Donald Trump's base in the United States; it is, thus, yet another means of projecting influence at Washington's expense. And third, the Kremlin has positioned itself against Trump's declaration that

Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, a widely unpopular view in the region (<http://bit.ly/2j0FS0k> Yerkramas.org, December 12).

In support of those policies, Moscow Patriarch Kirill organized a meeting last week (December 4) between Putin and eleven patriarchs and two heads of delegations of Orthodox Churches who were in the Russian capital for a major conclave of the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of the churchmen attending were the leaders of the historical Orthodox patriarchates in the Middle East, and all appeared more than willing to lend their support to the idea that cooperation at the Church-to-Church level would boost the policies Putin and Kirill now back (<http://bit.ly/2BhEUBg> Russkaya Liniya, December 5).

A major reason behind their agreement on this point is that the Russian president promised to offer his support to all the Orthodox Churches in the entire world, including, as the Russkaya Liniya religious affairs portal noted, "in the Middle East in particular." That was music to the ears of many if not all in attendance, who are under pressure not only from the predominantly Muslim populations in which they function but also from the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople. The latter has pretensions, as the senior Orthodox body, to becoming a kind of eastern papacy that can give orders to the others, including making decisions-as it has already-on the autocephaly of groups within their canonical areas that want independence from the existing patriarchates (<http://bit.ly/2CbJ8yD> Russkaya Liniya, December 5)."

Conclusion

The West's policy to first oust Bashar al-Assad before rebuilding Syria politically has led to an unending war in the country, massive migration waves to Europe, an increase in terrorist attempts in EU countries, the rise in power of extreme-right parties and the dangerous banalization of anti-Muslim attitudes.

Putin has become the kingmaker in the region and wants to appear as the protector of Muslims against radical Islamism and the savior of Christian minorities.

Is it what the EU wanted?

A too-narrow vision of religious freedom

– The Trump administration embraces a laudable desire to expand religious tolerance, but its own intolerance toward some undermines the message. –

By The Editorial Board –

New York Times (16.08.2018) – <https://nyti.ms/2Pnlu8Y> – Even President Trump's fiercest critics can find something to applaud in the administration's campaign to protect and advance religious freedom around the world.

The State Department's inaugural conference on the subject drew hundreds of activists and scores of foreign officials to Washington last month and produced a statement of core beliefs and a plan to hold follow-up meetings in the United States and overseas.

Invoking the 70-year-old Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the conference's concluding statement asserted that "every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and enjoys the freedom to change faith" and argued that "defending the freedom of religion or belief is the collective responsibility of the global community." To which we say, amen.

But the initiative's good intentions are in danger of being

undermined by the administration's political agenda, which emphasizes the American strain of evangelical Christianity over other beliefs. In addition, the administration is pursuing immigration and foreign aid policies that belie its stated defense of religious rights.

The conference was ostensibly called to address the rising threat to religious freedom. Some 80 percent of the global population is severely limited in exercising this right, and of the world's 198 countries, 55 countries, or 28 percent, experienced high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion in 2016, according to a recent study from the Pew Research Center.

While the horrific genocides against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and against the Yazidis in Iraq have been widely publicized, there are countless other examples of religious-based persecution and discrimination – against Coptic Christians in Egypt, Muslim Uighurs and Tibetan Buddhists in China, Bahais in Iran, and others.

The Trump administration is not the first to speak up for religious liberty. Since 1998, when Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, the State Department has issued annual assessments on how countries handle the issue and has used various government tools to defend groups and individuals overseas who are persecuted or discriminated against.

The current administration took its advocacy to a new level with the three-day conference, whose invited participants were more diverse than many expected. Despite his own strict Catholic leanings, Sam Brownback, the ambassador for international religious freedom, said the goal was to protect religious freedom for all, "not to say we favor this faith or that faith."

Yet, the event, headlined by Vice President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian, was clearly meant to appeal most to the

evangelicals who are among the president's most fervent political supporters, reflecting a selectivity that is antithetical to the very concept of religious freedom.

One major focus was a demand for the release of Andrew Brunson, an American Christian pastor held by Turkey for nearly two years on bogus charges of complicity in the 2016 aborted coup. Under pressure from evangelicals, Mr. Trump earlier this month imposed sanctions on Turkey, shaking its fragile economy, in an effort to secure Mr. Brunson's release. The president has been silent about 19 other detained Americans, including a NASA scientist who is Muslim.

The presence of a Hungarian delegation seemed particularly at odds with conference aims of promoting "equality under the law." Although Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has turned the Christian-majority country from democracy to nationalism and Islamophobia, he was praised by the evangelical Christian leader Tony Perkins for supporting persecuted Christians around the world.

President Barack Obama made a point of reaching out to the Muslim world, as well as to other faith communities. And like previous presidents, he tended to consider religious rights within the broad spectrum of human and civil rights. Countries that deny religious freedom invariably restrict other freedoms as well.

Many evangelicals, however, are increasingly promoting religious freedom as "our first freedom," as Mr. Pence did in his speech. Their argument is that human rights are becoming politicized and conflated with economic and social goals, such as equal rights for workers, women and gay and transgender people.

There are other reasons to question the administration's motives, starting with the fact that it has been reliably tough on human rights abuses only when they involve

adversaries like Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Last year, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told aides not to let human rights concerns create “obstacles” in pursuing American interests. In a memo, one of his advisers said that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Philippines, whose repressive leaders are admired by the president, should be given a pass on rights questions.

Then there are Mr. Trump’s disgraceful attempts to ban Muslims from some countries from entering the United States; his reprehensible treatment of refugees and immigrants, especially in separating children from their parents; and his continued support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

Such behavior hardly reflects the “tolerance” and appreciation of “human dignity” that conference documents endorsed.

Supporting people facing religious persecution overseas is both a moral burden of the United States and an exercise in self-interest. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, religious freedom is “an essential building block for all free societies.” But it is not the only one.

If the Trump administration aspires to truly advance religious freedom, it will need to embrace a far broader vision of human rights.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYT0pinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 18, 2018, on Page SR10 of the New York edition with the headline: A Too-Narrow Vision of Religious Freedom.

The editorial board represents the opinions of the board, its editor and the publisher. It is separate from the newsroom and the Op-Ed section.

CHINA: Underground Catholic priests removed

Authorities send two priests packing in Gansu province for holding a summer camp for youngsters.

Tianshui Diocese's open church holds a summer camp for young people in 2017. Two underground priests of Maijiqu Ganquan Catholic Church have been removed after being accused of holding a summer camp. (Photo by Faith Weekly)

UCA News (09.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2MiCy00> – Two underground parish priests in China's Gansu province have been removed after being accused of holding a summer camp for a youth group at their church.

Father Wang Yiqin of Hui county and Father Li Shidong of Leling city of Shandong province were serving Maijiqu Ganquan Catholic Church in Tianshui Diocese.

Tianshui Municipal Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee has sent a letter asking the local branch of the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association to send personnel to replace the priests, who were accused of holding a summer camp for Bosco Youth Group at the church and sent back to their hometowns.

On July 21, the committee issued a letter stating that no association personnel were involved with the church, which had become a base for underground clergy.

It asked the association to appoint personnel "to strengthen the management of religious affairs in accordance with the law and according to the regulations on religious affairs."

Father Zhao Jianzhang of Tianshui's open church is deputy director and secretary-general of the Gansu Catholic Patriotic Association and Catholic Administration Commission.

He told ucanews.com that he had been informed of the incident and the parish office had received a letter but he was out of town and would handle the incident when he returned.

"There are people in the government who want to break the current situation. They do not allow the underground church to exist and must convert it to be open because only Tianshui in northwest China still has an underground community," a source said.

Maijiqu Ganquan Catholic Church is one of only two underground churches in Tianshui Diocese.

Built in 1921, the church grounds cover 7,000 square meters containing a church, complex buildings and houses. The church has been approved by Yuanbeidao district government.

CHINA: More destroyed mosques in Xingiang

Seven out of eight mosques in one of the areas of Lianmuqin town in Xinjiang have been demolished; the remaining one is strictly supervised.

Bitter Winter (09.08.2018) –
<https://bitterwinter.org/more-destroyed-mosques-in-xinjiang/> –
According to a local source, seven of the eight mosques in the Shanshan county's 11th Brigade of Lianmuqin town, have already been destroyed. The local Muslims are allowed to attend the

remaining mosque, but there are more than twice as many government officers as worshipers inside it during prayers. The local authorities keep some guards in between the prayers as well. “Every time there are 13 Uyghurs practicing namāz, 37 government personnel are on duty,” a local Uyghur Muslim said. “We need to show our ID or give our fingerprints each time we enter the mosque for the five daily namāz prayers. Every time we kneel down and pray to Allah, the government officials stand beside us and stare directly at us. When they’re looking right at you, it’s impossible to feel calm. I finally stopped going.”

Reported by Li Benbo

Chinese Asylum Seekers: An Urgent Appeal to Chancellor Angela Merkel

Dear Chancellor Merkel:

We are NGOs active in the field of religious liberty, and write about the urgent situation of a Chinese refugee, Ms. Zhao, currently detained at the Aufsichtsund Dienstleistungsdirektion Landeseinrichtung für Asylbegehrende und Ausreisepflichtige in Hamburg, after she resisted forcible deportation to China on July 9.

We urge you to consider that, should Ms. Zhao be returned to China, she would certainly be arrested and might be subject to torture or “disappear” while in custody.

Ms. Zhao is a member of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), also

known as Eastern Lightning, a Chinese Christian new religious movement founded in 1991, whose core teaching is that Jesus has returned on earth incarnated as Almighty God, a Chinese woman currently leading and guiding the Church in the U.S.

CAG teaches that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has consistently persecuted Christians, is a manifestation of the evil Great Red Dragon of the Book of Revelation, and that the Dragon will fall under the weight of its errors. CAG does not advocate any revolution and is a non-violent religious movement. Virtually all Western academic scholars who have studied the CAG have debunked the accusation of crimes it has allegedly committed as fake news spread by the Chinese regime.

Because of both its beliefs and its phenomenal expansion (in 2014, CCP sources credited it with four million members), CAG has been persecuted since the 1990s and included since 1995 in the official list of xie jiao.

Xie jiao (normally translated as “evil cults,” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings”) are movements the government does not approve of. Being active in a xie jiao is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of 3 to 7 years or “more.”

CAG claims that more than 300,000 of its members have been arrested, more than 40,000 tortured, thousands held in the dreaded “transformation through education” camps, and more than 30 died in jail in highly suspicious circumstances. Bodies returned to the families in several cases had organs missing, evidence that the infamous “organ harvesting” practice has been extended to CAG prisoners. Scholars cannot confirm precise figures, but regard them as believable, as Chinese media and documents report weekly that hundreds of CAG members have been arrested.

A confidential CCP document leaked to Western media indicates that a new massive campaign for “eradicating” CAG has been

launched in 2018, thousands of members have been arrested and the number of arrests is still increasing.

Those who have sought asylum abroad are regarded as particularly dangerous members of the CAG and as disloyal citizens, and are prime candidates for harsher jail penalties, with a serious risk of torture and extra-judicial killing.

We urge Germany to honor its well-known tradition of protecting human rights and religious liberty and not to return Ms. Zhao, and other CAG members in similar conditions, to her persecutors, granting them the asylum they deserve.

August 1, 2018

CAP-LC Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions

EIFRF European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom

FOB – European Federation for Freedom of Belief

FOREF – Forum for Religious Freedom Europe

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers

LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience

ORLIR – International Observatory of Religious Freedom of Refugees

Soteria International

**Ukraine: 1030th anniversary
of Christianization of Kievan**

Rus celebration by UOC/ Kyiv Patriarchate

HRWF (29.07.2018) – On 28 July, the UOC/ KP celebrated the anniversary of the Christianization of Ukraine which took place with the conversion of Prince Vladimir in 988. President Poroshenko participated in the ceremony with his wife. On the previous day, the UOC/MP had celebrated the same historical event under the name of “Baptism of Rus” in Kyiv and so had the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow.

Up to 150,000 take part in UOC – KP procession in Kyiv

Interfax Ukraine (28.07.2018) – From 65,000 to 150,000 believers have participated in a religious procession of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) dedicated to the 1030th anniversary of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus-Ukraine.

“About 65,000 people participated in the march as of 13.00. The situation is calm and controlled,” First Deputy Interior Minister Serhiy Yarovy said the Interior Ministry’s page on Facebook on Saturday.

According to him, bomb disposal experts and dog handlers checked the route along which the column of pilgrims moved in order to prevent terror attacks and provocations.

The safety of citizens was ensured by the police, the National Guard and the State Emergency Service.

The head of the information department of the UOC-KP, Archbishop Yevstratiy (Zoria), said that up to 150,000 parishioners had taken part in the events.

“‘The biggest religious procession in Ukraine’s history’ – this is what Patriarch Filaret said in his speech after a prayer service on Saint Volodymyr Hill. According to various

estimates, from 65,000 to 150,000 believers or more gathered in the center of Kyiv for a prayer service,” Yevstratiy (Zoria) wrote on his Facebook page after the religious procession.

He noted that prior to this day “only the Maidan during the Revolution of Dignity brought together so many patriotic citizens who pray for the victory of truth and peace in Ukraine.”

Ukrinform: About 65,000 people participate in religious procession in Kyiv

Ukrinform (28.07.2018) – As of 13.00, about 65,000 people took part in a religious procession of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP).

The procession was guarded by 2,500 law enforcers, the press service of the Internal Ministry of Ukraine reported.

“As of 13:00, about 65,000 people participated in the religious procession. The situation was calm and controlled,” the deputy director of the Department of Communications of the Interior Ministry of Ukraine wrote on Facebook with reference to First Deputy Interior Minister Serhiy Yarovy.

The law enforcers continue to protect public order during the event.

As reported, on July 28, the ceremonial events on the occasion of the 1030th anniversary of the conversion of the Kyivan Rus-Ukraine to Christianity were held in Kyiv with the participation of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

President Poroshenko and his wife took part in the Cross Procession on the occasion of the 1030th anniversary of Christianization of Ukraine-Rus

RISU (28.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2vfaQaV> President Petro Poroshenko and his wife Maryna Poroshenko took part in the

Cross Procession on the occasion of the 1030th anniversary of Christianization of Ukraine-Rus'.

Believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, headed by Patriarch Filaret, and believers of the UAOC, headed by Metropolitan Macarius, passed to the garden square near the monument to St. Vladimir.

The Head of State together with his wife also took part in the prayer service for Ukraine and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

The festive event was attended by representatives of the Government, members of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches, well-known public figures, volunteers, representatives of culture, science and education.