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Aggressive nationalism is fuelling religious hatred - and the West is failing to act

Report says West is not doing enough to confront new crisis of oppressive nationalism

By John Pontifex

ACN News (22.11.2018) - A surge in aggressive nationalism in key parts of the world is to blame for a rise in violence and other intimidation against religious minorities - and the West is failing to convert words of concern into action, according to a report just out.

Assessing all 196 countries around the globe, the Religious Freedom in the World 2018 Report concludes that "ultra-nationalism" by both government and non-state actors has caused a spike in hatred against faith minorities in countries including leading regional powers such as India, China and Burma (Myanmar).

The report, produced every two years by the charity Aid to the Church in Need, finds that religious illiteracy, including within the media, and the lack of political action in the West, has exacerbated the problem, concluding that many faith minority groups suffer behind a "curtain of indifference".

Religious Freedom in the World 2018 criticises governments stating: "Most Western governments have failed to provide urgently needed assistance to minority faith groups, especially displaced communities wanting to return home."

The report says most governments failed to offer displaced minority faith groups the help they themselves have requested to enable their return to northern Iraq and elsewhere following the ousting of Daesh (ISIS) and other militant groups.

The investigation by the Catholic charity finds that media coverage about militant Islam has focused almost exclusively on the fight-back against Daesh and affiliate groups during the period under review - 2016-18 - and has largely ignored the relentless spread of militant Islamist movements in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

According to the report, a main driver behind the growth in extremism is the growing clash between Sunni and Shi'a, the main rival branches of Islam.

The report states that in the 25-month review period the situation for minority faith groups deteriorated in almost half of the countries classed as having significant violations of religious freedom - 18 out of a total of 38 countries.

Worsening intolerance towards religious minorities meant that for the first time in the report's 19-year history two new countries: Russia and Kyrgyzstan - were placed in the "discrimination" category.

The report adds that in a number of cases, such as Saudi Arabia and North Korea, the situation was already so bad that in the period under review it was virtually impossible for it to get any worse.

Turning to the West, the report highlights a surge in extremist attacks by militants against targets in the West.

Such terrorism striking at the heart of liberal democracies means that the threat can be called "neighbourhood terrorism".

The report says the danger from such terrorists is "universal, imminent and ever-present".

Religious Freedom in the World 2018 underlines in this context the growth of both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in the West as well.

Summarising the report's main findings, Editor-in-Chief John Pontifex said: "Aggressive ultra-nationalism - be it by hard-line governments or violent extremist groups - means many minority faith groups feel like aliens in their own country. They are easy targets in a new era of ignorance and intolerance.

"True, there are some like the Rohingya Muslims, whose plight has received due attention in the West, but so many others - such as Christians in Nigeria, Ahmadis in Pakistan and Baha'is in Iran - feel abandoned by the West where religious freedom has slipped down the human rights priority rankings."

61% of the world's population live in countries where religious freedom is not respected

ACN International presents its latest report on "Religious Freedom in the World" 2018

By Raquel Martin, edited by Maria Lozano

ACN News (19.11.2018) - Madrid, 22 November 2018. 61% of the world's population live in countries where religious freedom is not respected; in other words, 6 out of every 10 people around the world cannot express their faith with total freedom.

This is one of the key conclusions of the report on "Religious Freedom in the World", which was officially made public today in Rome by the international Catholic pastoral charity and pontifical foundation ACN International, with simultaneous worldwide launches also taking place in many other locations such as London, Paris, Santiago, Manila and New York.

The report looks at all 196 countries of the world, examining the degree to which the basic right to religious freedom, as defined in Article 18 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is respected with regard to all the world's major religious faiths.

Grave violations of religious freedom were found to occur in a total of 38 countries. In 17 of these, serious discrimination on grounds of religious faith prevails, whereas in the remaining 21 countries, there is outright persecution of religious minorities, in some cases to the point of death.

As the Report reveals, in some of the most wanting countries from the point of view of religious freedom, the situation has only deteriorated over the past two years. And on the global level in general, overall respect for religious freedom has also worsened.

In reaction to this development Dr. Thomas Heine-Geldern, Executive President of ACN recalls that "Pope Francis, as well as his immediate predecessors, have all stressed that religious freedom is a fundamental human right rooted in the dignity of man" and therefore, "as a papal foundation, we see it as our duty to draw worldwide attention to this intrinsic link between religious freedom and human dignity through proper information."

According to the report, in Africa's Middle Belt, religious freedom is threatened by the advance of jihadist Islamism, , whereas in countries such as India there is real concern at the growth of Hindu "ultranationalism", which has resulted in a marked decline in religious freedom in this country over the past two years.

As the study shows, in 22 countries the reason for the attacks on religious freedom are rooted in radical Islamism, while in other countries the dominant causes are rooted elsewhere, notably in the authoritarianism of States or governments which pursue policy of extreme nationalism.

Such authoritarian or extreme nationalist states number 16 in total, though at the same time they account for a very large population of over 3 billion people, since they include such countries as China, India, North Korea, Burma (Myanmar) Vietnam and Kyrgyzstan among others.

On a more positive note, the level of religious freedom appears to have improved both in Syria and Iraq. Following the military defeat of Isis/ Daesh, the religious minorities have begun to return to their former homes, most notably in the case of Christians from the towns and villages of the Niniveh Plains in Iraq.

On the basis of the information gathered in this report it is estimated that some 327 million Christians live in countries where they face religious persecution and 178 million in countries where there is discrimination on religious grounds. As a result, one in every

five Christians around the world lives in a country where there is religious persecution or discrimination.

"Unfortunately, a perceptible improvement in religious freedom is still far off," concludes Thomas Heine-Geldern. "Therefore, even this 14th report on religious freedom will not be the last one that our ACN Foundation will have to prepare in fulfilling its mission of information."

OP-ed: About Anti-Semitism: HRWF's position

HRWF (26.10.2018) - What is and what is not antisemitism, a widely spread concept about which there is no consensus in the international community? 'Everybody' has his own definition of antisemitism which is partly endorsed by some and challenged by others. A few examples will illustrate the confusion that prevails on this issue.

Definitions

The general definition of antisemitism is hostility or prejudice against Jews but various authorities have developed other definitions.

For the purposes of its 2005 Report on Global Anti-Semitism, the term was considered by the US State Department to mean **"hatred toward Jews-individually and as a group-that can be attributed to the Jewish religion and/or ethnicity."** (1)

In 2005, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (now EU Fundamental Rights Agency), developed a more detailed working definition, which states: **"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."** It also adds that **"such manifestations could also target the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity,"** but that **"criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic."** (2)

Late in 2013, the definition was removed from the website of the Fundamental Rights Agency. A spokesperson said that it had never been regarded as official and that the agency did not intend to develop its own definition (3). However, despite its disappearance from the website of the Fundamental Rights Agency, the definition has gained widespread international use. The definition has been adopted by the EU Working Group on Antisemitism and in 2010 it was adopted by the US Department of State. Other institutions followed suit.

In 2016, the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) - a body of 31 Member Countries, ten Observer Countries and seven international partner organisations - adopted the following working definition of antisemitism, making it the most widely endorsed definition of antisemitism around the world:

"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities." (4)

The IHRA was also endorsed by the OSCE/ ODIHR, an organization grouping together 57 states (5).

Mark Weitzman, Chair of the IHRA Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial, which proposed the adoption of the definition in 2015, said: **"In order to begin to address the problem of antisemitism, there must be clarity about what antisemitism actually is. This is not a simple question. The adopted working definition helps provide guidance in answer to this challenging question. Crucially, the definition adopted by the IHRA is endorsed by experts, is relevant and is of practical applicability."**

Position of HRWF

Due to the confusion prevailing about what is and what is not antisemitism, as well as the abuse of the concept for political purposes in concrete incidents and situations,

- HRWF avoids the use of the word "antisemitism" as it avoids the use of "islamophobia" for the same reasons
- HRWF uses the term "anti-Jewish" to qualify ideologies, state policies, hate speech, incidents and various forms of violence targeting Jews, their communities, their community buildings...
- HRWF reserves the use of the term "anti-Israel" for writings, speeches, demonstrations... criticizing the State of Israel.

(1) "Report on Global Anti-Semitism", U.S. State Department, 5 January 2005.

(2) *"Working Definition of Antisemitism"*. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Archived from the original on 5 January 2010. Retrieved 24 July 2010.

(3) Jewish Telegraphic Agency (5 December 2013). "What is anti-Semitism? EU racism agency unable to define term". Jerusalem Post. (<https://bit.ly/2OP8Ym0>)

(4) See <https://bit.ly/2ArCQfi> and <https://bit.ly/25wbn73>

(5) See "Understanding Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes and Addressing the Security Needs of Jewish Communities" (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/317166?download=true>)

Global Gathering Presses for Greater Religious Freedoms

By Knox Thames

DipNote (12.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Osm5Fq> - In the early hours before the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, I joined a group of survivors of 21st century religious persecution to tour the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Museum is a stark reminder of the failure of the international community to protect Jews from the horrors of genocide and the millions murdered for their faith and religious identity. But tragically persecution based on religion or belief continues today. Irene Weiss, a Holocaust survivor whose picture at Auschwitz hangs in the Museum, keynoted the Ministerial's opening ceremony in the powerful Hall of Remembrance. Behind her stood survivors of religious persecution from Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, and Vietnam, representing multiple faith communities including Christian, Muslim, Jewish,

Yezidi, Baha'i, Ahmadi, and Buddhist. We each lit candles to remember those who perished in the Holocaust and individuals suffering today.

The presence of these brave survivors made clear the need for the first-ever Ministerial. Persecution continues in too many places: ongoing repression of and atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in Burma, the brutal Chinese crackdown on Uighurs and other Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians, attacks by terrorists on Christians and other minorities in Iraq and Pakistan, authoritarian repression of Baha'is in Iran and now Yemen, and all faiths in North Korea. Studies show limits on religious freedom by state and non-state actors at all-time highs, impacting 83 percent of the global population.

In response, the United States convened a broad swath of governments, religious groups, and civil society to discuss how to push back against these trends and ensure everyone can enjoy freedom of conscience, the freedom to believe or not believe as one feels led. Our government spoke to the assembly of nations at the highest levels: Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Pompeo, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Haley, USAID Administrator Green, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Brownback, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Callista Gingrich, and other leading officials. More than 80 different governments from every region of the world – Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America – joined with more than 400 members of civil society organizations and religious communities. It was unprecedented.

The Ministerial was results oriented, intended to be more than just a “talk shop” of handwringing or self-congratulations. The two first days of the three-day event were specifically for civil society – to equip NGOs with information about obtaining resources for their important work, and for us to learn from them about the challenges they face and their ideas for solutions. To dive deeper, we convened breakout sessions focusing on topics like legal limitations, cultural heritage, atrocity prevention, women's rights and religious freedom, and rights of minorities. The IRF Roundtable also coordinated more than 30 side events around Washington on the margins of the Ministerial. In Congress, a special event was held with a network of parliamentarians from other countries with the aim of fostering greater collaboration on religious freedom.

To keep the discussions at the Ministerial grounded on the real impacts of this persecution, we spread survivor testimonies throughout all three days, so as to remind everyone of the challenges real people face daily. I had the honor of introducing Peter Bhatti, brother of slain Pakistani activist Shahbaz Bhatti, and Razia Sultana, an advocate for Rohingya rights working in the Bangladesh refugee camps. In addition, we convened a special training for interested groups at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) about how to apply for grants from the State Department's human rights and refugee bureaus, as well as USAID (links to PowerPoint presentations here). More than 200 hundred members of civil society attended, from a variety of organizations, faith advocacy groups, and countries.

We also challenged likeminded governments that support religious freedom, as set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to take new actions. Here, the United States led by example. We launched two new initiatives: the International Religious Freedom Fund (I-ReFF) and the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program, both aimed at bringing new resources to assist persecuted individuals or their advocates. In addition, to equip NGOs for greater impact, we launched a special accelerator workshop called Boldline to support and scale innovative public-private partnerships to promote religious freedom.

At the conclusion of the Ministerial, the Secretary released the groundbreaking Potomac Declaration and Plan of Action. The Potomac Declaration reflects the importance of promoting religious freedom as a universal human right to help ensure greater peace and

stability within and among nations. The Potomac Plan of Action provides the roadmap for meeting that goal, outlining a comprehensive framework of activities to promote religious freedom and to respond to persecution on account of religion, belief, or non-belief. The Plan of Action has six chapters: Defending the Human Right of Freedom of Religion or Belief; Confronting Legal Limitations; Advocating for Equal Rights and Protections for All, Including Members of Religious Minorities; Responding to Genocide and other Mass Atrocities; Preserving Cultural Heritage; and Strengthening the Response.

Finally, we wanted to directly address particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In response to several of the most severe instances of persecution, participating delegations endorsed three country statements on Burma, China, and Iran. In addition, we issued three thematic statements on global trends undermining religious freedom: blasphemy and apostasy laws, violations by non-state actors, and counterterrorism as a false pretext for religious freedom repression.

Never before had ministers convened to focus on advancing religious freedom for all. The event was well received and positive momentum was generated, with several countries offering to host follow up conferences. Immediately before and after, several governments launched new special ambassadorships for religious freedom: the United Kingdom, Germany, Mongolia, Bahrain, and Taiwan, joining others from Norway, Denmark, the EU, and a special office in Canada. Other governments are now considering doing this or undertaking similar initiatives. Both Vice President Pence and Secretary Pompeo pledged the Ministerial would be an annual event here in Washington.

While a successful opening salvo, our work has only just begun. Persecution on account of religion or belief remains a daily reality for millions around the world. However, the Ministerial has better positioned committed governments and civil society to unite and meet this challenge. From these efforts, hopefully individuals targeted for their beliefs – men and women of any faith or none, their advocates, and those holding the “wrong” beliefs – will know that the international community is working together like never before to assist them. Vice President Pence said it well: “As we labor, we can take confidence from the determination of the nations gathered here to advance a cause of religious liberty. Our cause is just. We’re advancing the first freedom that is essential to the people of all of our nations and to the world.”

About the Author: Knox Thames currently serves as the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia at the U.S. Department of State.

Human Rights Without Frontiers: 30 years of fighting totalitarianism

EU Today (18.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2uCzliW> - On 20 June, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) held a reception in Brussels to celebrate its 30 years of existence. Dozens of partners, collaborators, former staff, and volunteers who had contributed to its growth over the last three decades were in attendance, writes Willy Fautré, founder and executive director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

In 1988, the year which marked of the 40th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a group of Brussels-based human rights activists launched HRWF, with a lot of faith and no funding. At that time, there were no mobile telephones, internet, or social media... It was another world. One of the initial main objectives of the organisation

was to highlight political and religious persecution in European Communist countries and to help human rights defenders in the Soviet Bloc.

In June 1988, they published the first issue of a magazine in French named "Droits de l'Homme sans Frontières". At that time, Western Europe was under constant threat of Soviet nuclear attack. Unsurprisingly, the first magazine issue covered a summit between Reagan and Gorbachev in Moscow. On that occasion, Reagan had invited 100 Soviet dissidents to the US embassy in the Soviet capital, an unthinkable move after 70 years of communism in the USSR. Also unthinkable at that time was the idea that 18 months later the Iron Curtain would unexpectedly fall and Communist totalitarianism would collapse.

In subsequent issues, the magazine dealt with the apartheid regime in South Africa, Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the genocide in Rwanda, religious persecution in China, and many other human rights issues around the world.

Throughout its 30 years of existence, HRWF has adapted itself to a fast-changing world, to the expansion of the European Union, and to the development of new communication technologies. HRWF now distributes a well-known daily newsletters to more than 10,000 recipients, which serves as an early alert tool meant to sensitize members of the European Parliament, EU member states, think tanks, journalists, and embassies in Brussels, Geneva, New York and Washington to pressing human rights news. HRWF organizes conferences at the European Parliament and regularly advocates human rights in academic seminars, at the UN in Geneva, and at the OSCE.

In the 21st century, the world is now facing new threats, new forms of warfare, and new forms of totalitarianism. One of them is Islamic totalitarianism, an ideology that first wants to radically change the existing nature of Muslim-majority states into some form of a theocratic regime dominated by a radical and retrograde form of Islam. This ideology seeks to change the structures of pluralistic civil societies into societies to be ruled with an iron hand by one religious worldview imported from the Arabic peninsula.

Islamic totalitarianism wants daily life and the behaviours of each individual to be dominated by one religious worldview, as did the late Communist ideology with the political philosophy of Marx and Engels.

Islamic totalitarianism, mainly but not exclusively embodied by ISIS, is a political ideology which instrumentalises the Quran to create an alternative and challenging system of political governance. It is definitely not a religion. Its siren song divides and fragments Muslim communities around the world, and the primary 'collateral victims' of its fight for power are Muslims themselves, who in many countries adhere to a historically peaceful Islam. Christians in Muslim-majority countries are a second category of 'collateral victims'. EU member states are also targeted, suffering from terrorist attacks and the radicalization of young Muslims.

The Islamic totalitarian virus spreads gender segregation and discrimination, the division of society into new social castes, hate speech, anti-Semitism, and many other 'social diseases'. It is infecting the software of the ummah and is trying to infect humankind. Antidotes need to be administered and vaccinations have to be discovered, a challenge to the political researchers and engineers of the defense and security of the EU and of human rights.

Combating Islamic totalitarianism with ideas, with words and in practice is not only legitimate but it is obligatory, it is a duty for the EU and human rights organizations for it is a fight for human dignity, equality, and human rights for all.

By Willy Fautré, founder and executive director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

This article was published in EU Today under the unfortunate title "EU member states targeted by radicalization of young Muslims"

Countering extremist ideology

Many efforts to provide counter-narratives for Salafi-jihadism are currently failing to address extremists' abuse of religious scripture directly

By Rachel Bryson and Milo Comerford

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (06.02.2018) - Efforts to combat extremism through religious counter-narratives are expanding across the Muslim-majority world. But while a new study of over three thousand diverse religious texts showcases the rich potential for mainstream Islam to rebut extremist interpretations of theology, it also finds that counter-narrative efforts are inadequately confronting extremists' abuse of scripture and recourse to disputed religious concepts.

The analysis of contemporary texts put out by groups from across a broad ideological spectrum highlights that the ideology of Salafi-jihadism, held by groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, is palpably distinct from mainstream Sunni Islam. Across a sample of thousands of documents, of the 50 most quoted verses (ayat) of the Quran in Salafi-jihadi texts, only 8 percent are also prevalent in mainstream material. Salafi-jihadi texts do quote Islamic scripture extensively to justify their ideology, with five times more Quranic references than mainstream texts. However, they cherry-pick the Quran, drawing on a small cluster of verses to affirm their ideological position. In contrast, the mainstream quotes from a broader range of verses, reflecting a wider thematic focus. Such scriptural selectivity undermines arguments, made by both Islamist and anti-Muslim ideologues, that extremists have more religious legitimacy than mainstream interpretations. Pointing out extremists' selective and narrow references to scripture may be one way to prevent them from defining the rules of the game.

Beyond references to specific verses, analysis of texts' predominant religious concepts demonstrates how different interpretations draw on distinct "arsenals of ideas." The analysis suggests extremists are considerably more concerned with legalistic elements of scripture than personal piety.

Notably, a number of hardline Islamist groups—including Hizb ut-Tahrir, Jamaat-i-Islami, and some variations of the Muslim Brotherhood (more mainstream political parties, such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, were not included in analysis because they drew on considerably less religious content)—use scripture and concepts similarly to Salafi-jihadi groups in their core texts. This ideological proximity between Islamists and Salafi-jihadis, and their distance from the mainstream, becomes particularly apparent in their respective uses of the Quran. In the study's sample, 64 percent of the 50 most-referenced Quranic verses in the Islamists' texts overlap with those of the Salafi-jihadi groups, whereas Islamists and the mainstream only have 12 percent in common. This similarity does not necessarily indicate a shared ideological character, as texts may reach different interpretations of the same quotations. However, understanding such relationships can inform the growing global policy debate around the interplay between violent and nonviolent extremism.

These findings can also help evaluate the success of religiously rooted counter-narratives to extremism. The study analyzed what Quranic verses and hadith counter-narratives reference, what concepts they promote or refute, and what scholarship they draw on,

comparing these with the narratives in both Salafi-jihadi and Islamist texts. The counter-narratives split roughly three ways: content either condemns extremist actions as un-Islamic, offers peaceful alternatives and interpretations, or directly takes on and unpacks extremist arguments.

Yet most efforts are currently failing to respond to the key arguments peddled by extremists. They are only addressing and challenging the interpretations of 16 percent of the Quranic references prominently used by Salafi-jihadis in the study's sample, demonstrating that much more can be done to reclaim religious discourse from Islamist and jihadi ideologues. For example, one of the most commonly quoted verses in Salafi-jihadi literature (Surat Al-Anfal, verse 60) warns Muslims to prepare against armed battle with their opponents, but counter-narratives are currently failing to capitalize on the verse that follows, which emphasizes peaceful resolution of conflict.

Counter-narratives seem to address the religious ideas explored in Salafi-jihadi literature more successfully, but still do not prominently tackle about 40 percent of the key ideological concepts of Salafi-jihadism. Most efforts are focused exclusively on tackling narratives of violence, such as suicide attacks. For example, "This is not the Path to Paradise," a widely shared fatwa by Mauritanian sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah condemning the Islamic State's claim to have established a caliphate, is one of only a few examples of a counter-narrative that directly confronts the religious nuance of an Islamic state.

Around the Muslim-majority world, prominent religious institutions and leaders are increasingly proactively issuing rebuttals of extremist thought rooted in sound Islamic knowledge. While it is still in its early stages of development, Al-Azhar University's online Observatory for Combating Extremism, launched in June 2015, tracks the Islamic State's propaganda and rebuts extremist religious interpretations—for example, it issued an online feature correcting common misconceptions about Islam and publishes theologically founded replies to terrorist ideologies. It is also expanding its work to train young imams to use social media to effectively counter such narratives in their own communities. In addition, political leaders in Muslim-majority countries are increasingly associating good citizenship with confronting extremist worldviews. For the United Arab Emirates' national day, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed stressed "the pressing need that the Arab peoples, the young in particular, know that [extremist] ideologies are maiming the beautiful and shining face of our faith." Saudi Arabia's Etidal Center, opened in May 2017, aims to coordinate efforts by governments and international organizations to fight extremism, and hundreds of its analysts have been tasked with identifying and engaging with extremist "perversions" of Islam online.

Although some counter-narratives directly address the scripture and concepts violent extremist groups express, those who follow such a violent stance often have louder voices. Extremist interpretations are well funded, well organized, and effectively communicated. To drown them out, alternative Muslim voices are seeking to amplify their rebuttals against distortions of their faith. Initiatives such as the Sawab Center in Abu Dhabi provide strategic communications expertise on understanding audiences, helping mainstream religious leaders effectively engage a range of media and platforms when presenting arguments. For example, in November 2017 the Sawab Center launched a joint Twitter campaign with the Al-Azhar Observatory to emphasize the values of mercy and tolerance. But grassroots religious responses still face challenges in garnering resources, using effective platforms, and coordinating efforts with counterparts.

In Western countries, diverse Muslim-led civil-society responses—such as the UK-sponsored Imams Online project—also provide credibility and community access for counter-narratives. And as more local actors refute extremist interpretations of Islamic scripture, governments can distance themselves from accusations that their efforts to counter destructive ideologies are an attempt to cultivate a state-sanctioned Islam, a perception that plays into extremists' hands. As public debates about Islamist extremism

grow, efforts to counter it may be more effective if they directly take on verses and hadith most cited by extremists, engaging with the concepts they most focus on, and offering alternative interpretations.

International Convention «Law and Freedom of Belief in Europe, a difficult journey»



European Federation for Freedom of Belief (21.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2G48eSb> -

In the prestigious setting of Sant'Apollonia Auditorium at the homonymous XIV century convent complex located in Via San Gallo, in the historic center of Florence, the international convention of the European Federation for the Freedom of the Belief (FOB) took place on 18th and 19th January, **under the auspices of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (Dr. Thorbjørn Jagland), of the patronage of the Tuscany Regional Council, of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and of the**

University of Florence.

The Medal of the President of the Italian Republic was conferred to the convention. Prof. Silvio Calzolari (Secretary of FOB), presenting it together with **attorney Alessandro Amicarelli (President of FOB)**, publicly thanked the President of the Republic "for having expressed his appreciation for FOB's initiative, as an event of particular cultural and social value, through the attribution of a representation prize, a medal, which honors us".

After the greetings of **Prof. Silvio Calzolari (Secretary of FOB)**, the **President of the Council of the Region of Tuscany, Dr. Eugenio Giani**, took the floor and brought the greetings from the administration he presides since from May 2015. It was then the turn of **Honorable Riccardo Migliori, past president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly**, who reiterated what he already expressed in Florence at the presentation of the Proceedings on 7 April 2017, namely that the importance and the goodness of FOB's initiatives are, in fact, even bigger and more influential than FOB itself believes.

Attorney Alessandro Amicarelli presented the appeal of the Federation to national and European authorities for the protection of the freedom of belief and disbelief, and for the protection of the fundamental rights of religious minorities. This appeal calls for a concrete commitment by the various member states of the European Union to adopt the FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) guidelines unfortunately still not sufficiently considered or even disregarded here and there in the countries of the Union.

Attorney Amicarelli therefore declared open the proceedings of the convention by introducing **Prof. Pietro Nocita, director of the magazine Criminal Justice and past president co-founder of FOB**, who moderated the first session dedicated to the 'Philosophy and theory of law', of which he was also the first speaker with a highly esteemed speech on 'The Legal Status of Religious Denominations Other Than the Roman Catholic'.



It was then the turn of the intellectual creator of the themes of the convention, **lawyer Fabrizio d'Agostini of Turin** and then, gradually, the rest of the speakers as per the planned program.

The convention, organized in collaboration with the associated **Soteria International, the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (EFIRF), the European Coordination for Freedom of Conscience (CAP)**, was aimed to promote, without timidity, the defense of freedom of belief and religion in a hope for peace, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect and recognition.

Numerous members of associations working for the protection of the fundamental human rights, such as that of freedom of belief, were present: **Prof. Massimo Introvigne (Center for New Religions Studies, CESNUR), Dr. Willy Fautré (Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, HRWF), Dr. Rosita Soryté (President of the International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees, ORLIR) and many others including a large delegation of the Church of Almighty God led by Dr. Ruiqing Xu, the Imam of Florence and president of UCOI Izzedin Elzir and Dr. Andrea Bottai (National Councilor of the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, IBISG).**

In the hall was also present a stand of **Pacini Editore SpA of Pisa**, a renowned publishing house established in 1872 which the reference publisher of the Federation.

The initiative saw a prestigious parterre of speakers and moderators, including the aforementioned **Prof. Nocita, Prof. Roberto Celada Ballanti (professor at the University of Genoa), Prof. Marco Vannini of Florence (philosopher), Prof. Marco Ventura (professor at the University of Siena), Prof. Luigi Berzano (priest, professor at the University of Turin), Prof. Enzo Pace (professor at the University of Padua), Prof. Stefano Allievi (at the University of Padua), Prof. Aldo Natale Terrin (priest, professor at the Santa Giustina Theological Faculty of**

Padua), Prof. Susan Palmer (professor at the Concordia University, Montreal, Canada), Prof. Germana Carobene (professor at the University of Naples), Prof. Nicola Colaiani (former magistrate of the Supreme Court of Cassation and professor at the University of Bari), Dr. Fabio Fanfani (Consul and Vice-Dean of the Consular Corps of Florence), Prof. Mohamed Bamoshmoosh (Islamic Community of Tuscany), Prof. Stefano Grossi (professor at the Theological Faculty of Central Italy) and Prof. Paolo Naso (professor at the University of Rome La Sapienza) who he was also entrusted with the moderation of the second session of Thursday.

Among the numerous public, in addition to representatives of the academic world including important jurists such as **Prof. Francesco Onida and Prof. Giuseppe Casuscelli**, also representatives of religious and spiritual communities such as **Dr. Andrea Bottai (National Councilor of the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, IBISG), Father Fausto Sbaffoni (prior of the Florentine Convent of San Marco)**, and others.



During the two days of the convention, a number of important issues were discussed, including: the sociology of religions (with a view to both the issue of religious freedom and that of the new geography of religious minorities), ecclesiastical law and the legal aspects of religious confessions, the ideological and legal obstacles to the right to freedom of belief in Europe (among which the secular state, the drift of anti-sectarianism, the alarmist propaganda against the new religious movements and the consequent attempts to establish the controversial crime of "mental manipulation").

The session moderated by **Prof. Introvigne** titled '*ideological and juridical obstacles to the right to freedom of belief in Europe*' focused on these latter themes: the spotlight was turned on a questionable legislative initiative such as the French law About-Picard which has unjustly penalized a large number of religious groups, the lack of neutrality of the French state on these issues and the controversial **FECRIS** (the European Federation

of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism), an NGO (an abbreviation that literally means non-governmental organization) which, however, seems to betray its own qualification since it is financed by the Paris government, as FOB has repeatedly denounced.

The second day of the works ended with a round table attended by representatives of the various associations for freedom of belief in Europe, and during which the various representatives of the religions present reiterated the problems existing in the various countries of origin between which the existence of rights only on paper but in truth scarcely protected when not properly trampled (dramatic, in this sense, is the case of the **Church of Almighty God in China**).



Of particular interest, for the juridical aspects that has touched, was the report of Prof. Nocita who spoke of the legislative superstructures present in the Italian legal system, which instead of guaranteeing the implementation of the Constitution diminish it or subordinate it to a machine sometimes oppressive, as well as cumbersome, especially when it comes to allowing religious minorities to have a space in society and fully assert their fundamental rights.

Equally prominent has been the report of **Prof. Ventura, a European jurist**, who pointed out and highlighted the inconsistencies between laws at the European level and stressed the need for the Union to put its administrative system in order by seizing the already available opportunities. In this way, the FOB convention did not just launch a cry of alarm; it also indicated a very specific path that Europe can take to improve things.

This is really necessary because, as the various speakers have gradually indicated each one from their own specialist perspective, if the existing protections are not actively maintained and guaranteed, inevitably we will end up opening the door to some liberticidal drifts.

In fact, at the end of the event, on the occasion of the final greetings, Prof. Introvigne presented a very brief but very interesting and sensitive analysis of the social genesis of religious persecutions, a phenomenon unfortunately no longer limited to dark phases of history but terribly present in various parts of the world. The spiral begins with intolerance, continues with discrimination and then leads to persecution: a thesis, this, presented during a convention held in Rome in 2015 under the aegis of the OSCE.

Covered in FOB event, was also the issue of hate and alarmism campaigns that prepare the ground for religious discrimination and violence which is a keystone of the Federation's activities: in fact, it is precisely this that makes FOB and its work even more important and crucial, that is, the objective of preserving freedom of conscience and the right to believe or not believe, not only in Italy or in Western European countries (in to which this prerogative is apparently still guaranteed), but also where there are already signs of serious and far more serious violations of fundamental rights such as Russia and China.

Widening awareness on these issues is even more important in the countries where religious freedom is apparently guaranteed, precisely because failure to intervene whenever there are signs of intolerance could result in the triggering of the mechanism of discrimination and hatred which, as a consequence, lead to discrimination, persecution and from there even faster to violent repression.

The example brought by Introvigne, simple but very effective, is that of a little ball placed on an inclined plane: if the little ball is not stopped at the start, its descent becomes so rapid that attempts to stop it become impossible.

That's the intent of FOB: to stop the small ball before it is too late.

The convention was graced by the short but very intense performances of **Vincenzo Zitello (bardic and celtic harp) and Flavio Cucchi (classic guitar)**.

See the Italian version at

<https://freedomofbelief.net/it/attivita/convegno-internazionale-diritto-e-liberta-di-credo-in-europa-un-cammino-difficile>

HRWF Footnote: Session on anti-sect movements and FECRIS

The papers of Attorney Patricia Duval, Willy Fautré and Thierry Valle can be obtained through HRWF

17:30 - Professor Susan J. Palmer, University of Concordia, Montreal

The "Protective" State and application of France's About-Picard law

17:55 - Dr. Patricia Duval, Lawyer in Paris

State neutrality and anti-sect movements, the France case

18:20 - Mr Willy Fautre, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.

Anti-sect Movements and Laïcité: the French-Russian Orthodox Connection

18:45 - Mr Thierry Valle, Director of the NGO CAP Liberté de Conscience

FECRIS, an NGO financed by the French government

Thursday, 18 January 2018

Believers of all faiths and atheists in prison: 24 countries of particular concern

Freedom of religion and from religion: Human Rights Without Frontiers publishes over 2200 documented of prisoners on its database online

HRWF Int'l (10.01.2018) – ***Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*** has released its 2017 database of believers and non-believers who have been imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Twenty-four countries in all were identified by *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* for depriving believers and unbelievers of their freedom in 2017: **Algeria, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.**

"In 2017, we documented over 2200 individual cases of illegal imprisonment of believers and non-believers and we carried out campaigns to get their release, some with success," according to Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*.

Among all denominations, Christians of all faiths were in jail in the highest number of countries: Protestants in 13 countries, Catholics and Orthodox in 2 countries.

However, members of a dozen other religious or belief communities are known to have been in jail in 2017: Jehovah's Witnesses in 6 countries; Sunnis in 4 countries; Shias, Said Nursi and Tabligh Jamaat followers in 3 countries; Ahmadis, Baha'is, Buddhists and Sufis in 2 countries; Atheists in Egypt, Falun Gong practitioners in China, and Scientologists in Russia.

"Prison terms are usually imposed on peaceful and law-abiding members of religious or belief groups on the basis of laws restricting their freedom to change religion, share one's beliefs, and practice their right to freedom of association, worship and assembly. Additionally, they may be imprisoned simply because of their religious identity", Fautré said.

According to the database, China, Iran and South Korea recorded the largest number of freedom of religion or belief prisoners.

In **China**, Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively put in prison, a number of Catholic priests and bishops have also been missing, since their arrests many years ago for being faithful to the Pope instead of swearing allegiance to the Communist Party.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of house churches, and Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, both of which are systematically suspected of separatism, are also particular targets of the regime.

In **Iran**, the Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, make up the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by home-grown Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who extensively carry out missionary activities among their fellow citizens despite the risk of imprisonment and execution. Baluchi and Kurdish Sunnis as well as Sufis are also particularly targeted.

In **South Korea**, over 300 young objectors to military service were still serving 18-month prison terms at the end of 2017. Since the Korean War, more than 19,200 Jehovah's Witnesses have reportedly been sentenced to a combined total of over 37,200

years in prison for refusing to perform military service. **Eritrea, Singapore and Tajikistan** are other countries which still imprison conscientious objectors.

“Our best wish for 2018 is that the EU converts its words into action and fully uses the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief to help release many FoRB prisoners of conscience,” Fautré hopes.

The lists of prisoners per country can be consulted at: <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

(*) *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* has been monitoring freedom of religion or belief as a non-religious organization since 1989. In 2017 it covered in its daily newsletter more than 70 countries where there were incidents related to freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination. See its news database at <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

For further information, contact

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Website: <http://www.hrwf.eu>

About anti-Muslim ideologies, anti-Muslim state policies and inter-Muslim hostilities

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (04.01.2017) – Surveys highlight that in non-Muslim majority countries Muslims often face hostility, stigmatization and discrimination from state and non-state actors. Furthermore, in Muslim-majority countries, the majority Muslim denomination is often responsible for persecution and discrimination against minority Muslim denominations.

Various ideologies underpin global or specific anti-Muslim state policies and social attitudes, including

- a nationalist ideology closely linked to a dominant religion in Myanmar, leading to pogroms, mass killings, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing;
- the Communist ideology enforcing atheism in China, leading to severe restrictions of religious freedom, arrests and imprisonment;
- religiously motivated anti-Muslim ideologies among the Christian right Evangelicals in the United States and in some European Christian majority countries
- populist, extreme-right, fascist or neo-nazi ideologies, such as in Europe and North America
- competing and conflicting theologies inside Islam, each having a different political and social governance agenda, as in Iraq or Syria..

Inter-Muslim hostilities – stemming from theological disputes and struggles for power among various violent Islamist groups – produce innumerable victims of suicide

bombings, terrorist attacks, regional conflicts and wars. No global statistics are available on the number of fatalities per religion, but according to a 2011 report from the U.S. government's National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC), Muslims suffered between 82 and 97% of terrorism-related fatalities during the previous five years.

Terrorist and jihadist groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Talibans, al-Shaabab and Boko Haram have killed and continue to kill dozens of Muslims every day. Their goal is to impose a totalitarian form of governance inspired by their vision and interpretation of Islam. According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) at the University of Maryland (United States), between 2004 and 2013, roughly half of all terrorist attacks and 60% of fatalities due to terrorist attacks took place in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan – all of which have a majority Muslim population.

Sunni communities are oppressed in Iran, a Shia majority country, while the Sunni community in Bahrain oppresses the local Shia majority, and Saudi Arabia, a Wahhabi majority country, persecutes its Shia minority.

When a state opts to recognize one form of Islam, dissidents and reformers may be deemed heretical and persecuted, as is the case in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, other currents of Islam (such as Sufis, Tablighi Jamaat and Said Nursi) may be banned, even though the groups are nonviolent and pose no problem to the security and the territorial integrity of the state. Their members may be arrested and imprisoned, as is the case in Azerbaijan, Russia, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan.

This list offers a snapshot of anti-Muslim and inter-Muslim persecution around the world.

About anti-Christian ideologies, anti-Christian state repression and anti-Christian hostility

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (02.01.2017) - According to a recent Pew Center Research report, Christians, who numbered 2.3 billion in the world in 2015, were harassed by governments or social groups in a total of 128 countries – more countries than any other religious group.

Christians of all faiths around the world are currently victims of state repression, discrimination and/or (violent) social hostility for being Christians and/or practicing their fundamental right to religious freedom: freedom to have and to keep their religion; freedom of expression about issues related to religion, freedom of association, worship and assembly; freedom to have missionary activities and to convert. Various ideologies are underpinning anti-Christian state policies and social attitudes. They lead to diverse violations of human rights and religious freedom committed

- in the name of various forms of Communist ideologies enforcing atheism, such as in China, Eritrea, Laos, North Korea, Vietnam...
- in the name of Islam in Muslim majority countries where it is the official religion of the state or the primary source of the Constitution and the legislation, such as in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen ...
- in the name of Islam in Muslim majority countries where there is no official state religion, such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey...

- in the name of Hinduism, including in (nominally) secular state, such as in India and in Nepal
- in the name of secularism/*laïcité*, anarchist ideologies or Islam in liberal democracies where anti-Christian social hostility is expressed through hate speech, acts of vandalism of places of worship and community buildings, physical attacks, etc. which are often under-reported or ignored by public powers and the media.

State repression against Christians can include the death penalty (Pakistan), various forms of physical punishment (Saudi Arabia), prison terms (China), exorbitant fines (Central Asia) and discriminatory restrictions to their rights.

Social hostility by individuals or collectively organized non-state actors can include a wide range of religiously or ideologically motivated acts: discrimination, insults, hate speech and hate crimes, derogatory statements by public officials, acts of vandalism targeting places of worship and community buildings, physical attacks, torture, killings, extra-judicial executions, communal violence, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide.

This is a picture of anti-Christian persecution around the world.

About the Islamic totalitarianism

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (01.01.2017) - An ideology that wants to radically change the existing nature of a state into a theocracy to be dominated by one religious worldview

An ideology that wants to change the structure of a diverse civil society into a society to be dominated by one religious worldview

An ideology that wants the daily life and the behavior of each individual to be dominated by one religious worldview

is a totalitarian ideology, as was the Communist ideology inspired by the political philosophy of Marx and Engels.

Islamic totalitarianism is a totalitarian ideology inspired by the Quran but it is not a religion.

It divides and fragments the Muslim communities around the world.

The primary "collateral victims" of the fight for power of Islamic totalitarianism are Muslims, who in many countries adhere to an historically peaceful Islam.

Christians are a second category of "collateral victims" of Islamic totalitarianism in Muslim majority countries.

Diverse civil populations in countries where Islam is not professed by a majority are the third category of "collateral victims" of Islamic totalitarianism.

The Islamic totalitarian virus infecting the software of the *ummah* must not infect humankind. An antidote must be administered.

Combating Islamist totalitarianism with ideas, with words and in practice is legitimate. It is obligatory. It is the self-defence of states, of non-Muslim societies and minorities, and of individuals.

Combating groups and individuals, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic universities such as al-Azhar, which promulgate Islamic totalitarian ideologies is a must.

This is not Islamophobia. It is a fight for human dignity for all, for equality for all and for human rights for all.

Twenty-three Catholic missionaries were killed in the world in 2017

ZENIT (29.12.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qdx7a5> - Twenty-three Catholic missionaries were killed in the world in 2017: 13 priests, one Religious, one nun, and eight laymen reported the Vatican Agency *Fides*, on Thursday, December 28, 2017. (*)

For the eighth consecutive year, the highest number was recorded in America, where 11 Catholics on mission were killed (eight priests, one Religious, and two laymen), followed by Africa with 10 victims (four priests, one nun, and five laymen), and by Asia where one priest and one layman were killed.

According to data published by *Fides*, from 2000 to 2016, 424 Catholics on mission were killed in the world, of which five were Bishops.

The Agency explained that "numerous pastoral workers were killed during robbery attempts in contexts of economic and cultural poverty, of moral and environmental degradation, where violence and abuses are regarded as a rule of conduct."

For *Fides*, this list is "only the tip of the iceberg," because the list of pastoral workers or of "simple Catholics" who were "assaulted, beaten, robbed, threatened" is much longer, as well as that "of Catholic structures at the service of the whole population, which were assaulted, vandalized or pillaged."

To the provisional lists drawn up annually by *Fides*, "the long list must always be added of those of whom there has been no news for a long time or whose name is unknown, who – in the four corners of the planet – suffer and pay with their life for their faith in Jesus Christ."

The murderers of priests or Religious "are rarely identified or condemned," deplored *Fides*, which gave the example of the murder of Spanish missionary Vicente Canas, killed in Brazil in 1987. During the first trial in 2006, the accused were acquitted for lack of evidence; a new trial led to the condemnation of the sponsor, sole survivor of the accused.

Fides also explained that its annual list "doesn't concern only the missionaries *ad gentes*, in the strict sense of the term, but attempts to register all the pastoral workers who died in a violent way, not explicitly "out of hatred for the faith." "For this reason, we prefer not to use the term 'martyrs,' except in its etymological sense of "witnesses," so as not to anticipate the judgment that the Church might give eventually on some among them."

(*) <http://www.fides.org/en/news/63464>

