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Official and state-favored religions under the microscope of discrimination

USCIRF releases [a report](#) on religious freedom implications of official and favored religions

USCIRF (17.11.2022) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) today released the following new report:

[Global Overview of Official and Favored Religions and Legal Implications for Religious Freedom](#) – This report provides an overview of the ways governments enforce religion through their laws and policies and the implications of that enforcement for religious freedom and related human rights. Many governments that repress religious freedom do so through laws and policies that coerce compliance with a particular religious interpretation, typically one that aligns with an official or state-favored religion. Such laws—particularly when governments actively enforce them—can lead to severe violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and other human rights, including discrimination on the basis of religion against individuals and communities who do not adhere to the state's interpretation. The report, based on research into all countries with official or favored religions, finds that most governments with an official or favored religion also maintain laws or policies on the basis of religion that lead to discrimination or repression, or that hold the potential to do so. Far fewer such countries—less than a

third—name an official or favored religion and maintain no discriminatory laws or policies based on that religion.

Stop praying for persecuted Christians only

We don't demonstrate such exclusionary self-focus in other ministry spheres. Opening our aperture is biblical and aids our advocacy.

By KNOX THAMES

Christianity Today (04.11.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3fIjmdY> - It rankles me when Christians pray only for persecuted Christians.

I don't disagree with praying for persecuted Christians, to be clear. I pray for them. They need help, as a global pandemic of persecution confronts believers daily with violence on account of their faith.

However, to truly follow the Bible's teachings I believe we shouldn't exclusively pray for our fellow Christians. Rather we are called to pray for *all* who suffer violent persecution, Christian and non-Christian alike.

When the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) arrives on November 6, many activists will pen articles about Christians being the "most persecuted" faith in the world. And certainly, persecuted Christians [face severe problems](#) worldwide.

From my 20 years of international work on religious freedom, I know Christians suffer violent persecution from governments like China or terrorists like Boko Haram. I've [personally met](#) such believers, advocated for them, and prayed for them.

Yet, while such "most persecuted" claims may be true, [definitional problems](#) with what constitutes *persecution* make such assertions hard to assess.

But more importantly, we are not in a competition. Christians are part of a fellowship of suffering, sharing in persecution with other faith groups. Many overlook or forget how in every context where Christians suffer, others also hurt. In fact, the severity experienced by other minority groups often surpasses Christian persecution.

Followers of Jesus certainly suffer in China and Burma (Myanmar), but Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims are victims of outright genocide by those nations' regimes. While ISIS indeed targeted Iraqi Christians, thousands of Yazidis were murdered, sold into sex slavery, or disappeared.

Scores of Afghan Christians were forced to flee the Taliban's return. Yet the 5 million Hazara Shia that remain face continued terrorist attacks, with a recent suicide blast murdering 50 children at school. Boko Haram has devastated churches in Nigeria's north,

while the majority Muslims that resist the jihadists' theocracy risk death or jail for blasphemy.

Christians need not feel insecure if our suffering is less than others. However, some advocates draw false equivalencies with religious liberty limitations in North America and Europe to actual persecution abroad. Conflating violence with [pandemic restrictions](#) or other domestic debates reduces the veracity of the word *persecution* and kills its credibility.

Some governments act similarly. For example, Hungary's Viktor Orbán often boasts about defending persecuted Christians and traditional Christian values. His diplomats [speak](#) about the twin threats to Christians of "persecution and aggressive secularism," conflating a supposedly "dangerous" liberal elite with ISIS atrocities. Orbán's government has indeed provided helpful money to churches in Iraq, Nigeria, and elsewhere, yet while ignoring other suffering groups next door.

Christians only helping Christians is not "Christian." Troublingly, this exclusive Christians-first approach seems unique to the international religious freedom sphere.

In other contexts, believers have heroically demonstrated Christ's love to a hurting world by feeding the hungry and assisting those in need, regardless of faith. Their generous approach reflects the best of Jesus' message. If Christian aid groups acted otherwise, we would recoil in horror.

Imagine World Vision only providing food to starving Christians, World Relief only assisting Christian refugees, Samaritan's Purse only helping evangelicals, or Catholic charities only assisting those looking to Rome for guidance.

The narrow focus on Christian persecution is a jarringly contorted approach to Christian charity. And practically, our exclusionary self-focus creates distance between Christ and nonbelievers.

From my time working in multifaith environments, I can attest to how outsiders find Christians' self-promotion of Christian persecution puzzling, if not outright off-putting. They know enough about Jesus' compassionate message that this doesn't seem to fit. They wonder how Christians—supposed followers of a movement whose founder stressed the love of everyone, enemies included—can seemingly ignore the persecution of their non-Christian neighbors.

There should be no spiritual litmus test for helping those suffering violent persecution because of their beliefs. I've appreciated how David Curry of Open Doors USA and Merv Thomas of CSW have spoken out for groups as distinct as Muslims and atheists. The Southern Baptist Convention has also led, last summer becoming the first denomination to [condemn the Uyghur genocide](#). Following these examples, Christians should lead the charge in helping everyone. Any individual persecuted on account of their beliefs is a tragedy worthy of prayer and advocacy.

The Bible is replete with calls to help regardless of race or creed. For example, the prophet Micah called God's followers to "seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly"—without caveats or exclusions. During Jesus' earthly ministry, he explained how we should love God and our neighbors through the example of the Good Samaritan, a hero who crossed religious and ethnic lines to help a stranger. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he gives this dual charge: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all

people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:10). As Paul instructs, we must do better at helping our own, but we must also improve how we do good to all.

In response, IDOP presents an opportunity to live out Christ's commands to pray for our own and for others. Let's remember our persecuted brethren, but let's not *only* pray for persecuted Christians but for everyone suffering for their beliefs. We can shift to an International Day of Prayer for All the Persecuted, making it a [second Holy Week](#) of sorts. Loving God and others summarized Jesus' message during his earthly ministry. The body of Christ should be known for our concern for all, both Christian and not. Christ-followers beseeching God to assist anyone victimized for their faith (or non-belief) would be a powerful testimony. Doing so would improve our witness and build bridges between religions, helping minority Christians secure a brighter future in their communities.

In *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “There are no *ordinary* people. You have never spoken to a mere mortal.” Our global neighbors, all bearing the image of God, suffer in a hurting world that needs our help.

If we truly believe God loves everyone and made everyone in his image, we must pray and advocate for all who suffer. Yes, we should pray for persecuted Christians, but also for the persecuted from other beliefs.

Photo: Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images - Flags at a 2020 rally outside the White House in support of the persecuted Uyghurs.

Apostasy & death penalty: Over 90 NGOs and individuals against death penalty

Jubilee Campaign (10.10.2022) – [Website](#) – On 10th October 2022, over 90 individuals and organisations have signed a Charter calling on countries which continue mandate the death penalty for non-violent conduct, including apostasy and blasphemy, to repeal such laws. Apostasy and blasphemy laws violate core tenets of freedom of religion and belief and expression.

Apostasy and blasphemy laws not only have a chilling effect on a plethora of human rights but place individuals accused under threat of torture from state and non-state actors. This was brought up during the Human Rights Council in a statement delivered by Yemeni Christian convert – Musheer – the first oral [statement](#) from a Christian Yemeni. Yemen is one of the 11 countries where leaving the state interpretation of Islam can lead to the death penalty. The UN experts on torture and extrajudicial killings released a statement on the [link](#) between the death penalty and torture.

The total number of countries with the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy has reduced since the Monash University [released](#) its report *Killing in the Name of God: State-Sanctioned Violations of Religious Freedom* on year ago. Since the Charter was signed on, the United Arab Emirates, dropped the death penalty for apostasy, bringing the at least 12 countries which maintain the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy down to 11.

The [Charter](#) in addition to condemning the continued sanction of the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy, also calls on states to take a concrete action and support specific language calling for the repeal of the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy in two respective resolutions the moratorium on the death penalty and extrajudicial executions.

The initial release of the Charter on 22 August 2022, International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, was followed up by the a multi-faith and multi-disciplinary delegation of members of the International Religious Freedom Summit Global Campaign to Repeal Apostasy and Blasphemy Laws visiting UN Permanent Missions in New York in mid-September. The coalition included lawyer Kola Alapinni from Nigeria who serves as the legal counsel for Yahaya Sharif-Aminu – a Sufi singer Nigerian authorities sentenced to death. They are now calling on the remaining states which are mostly Muslim-majority to: “ separate the punitive Islamic Laws from Islam,” Soraya M. Deen MA.

Organizations

Coptic Solidarity
Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Council of Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka
Eglise Protestante d’Algérie
Eleos Justice
European Office Church of Scientology for Public Affairs and Human Rights
Ex-Muslims of India
Ex-Muslims of North America
Ex-Muslims of Toronto
Faithless Hijabi
Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe
Foundation for Religious Freedom
Fundacion para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad
Genocide Watch
Humanists Association of Sri Lanka
Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust
International Christian Concern
International Human Rights Committee
International Institute for Religious Freedom
International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief Steering Group
International Religious Liberty Association
Jubilee Campaign Netherlands
Jubilee Campaign USA
LEAH Foundation
Lumières Sans Frontières
M.A.L.I. Morocco
Minority Concern
Muslims for Progressive Values
Muslim Women Speakers
Parity
Prayer Pioneers
Rumi Forum
Secular Coalition for America
Set My People Free
Society for Humanistic Judaism
Tahrir Alnisa Foundation
The Clergy Project
Voice for Justice

Widows and Orphans
World Evangelical Alliance

(Formerly) from parliaments:

Baroness Caroline Cox – Founder, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust; Independent Member, United Kingdom House of Lords

Ján Figel – Former European Union Commissioner; Former European Union Freedom of Religion or Belief Special Envoy; Member, International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Council of Experts

Farahnaz Ispahani – Former Pakistan Parliamentarian; Senior Fellow, Religious Freedom Institute

Abid Raja – Member of Parliament, Norway

Joël Voordewind – Former Member, House of Representatives of the Netherlands

Other signatories are academics, journalists, lawyers, faith leaders, human rights advocates, civil society members.

The FoRB International Ministerial Conference in London, a great mass

HRWF (12.08.2022) - On the 5th and 6th July, the UK-Government hosted the first in-person International Ministerial Conference on this topic since 2019 (the US held the two first ministerial conferences in 2018 and 2019). The official events were organized at the Queen Elizabeth II Center in London where only a number of NGOs were granted full access while others had only limited or no access.

The Ministerial Conference brought together government members, officials, faith and belief leaders and civil society organisations from over 100 countries and international organizations to act in promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities around the world. More than 700 delegates participated in the official events and around a hundred fringe sessions were organized, according to the moderator of the opening ceremony.

The purpose of the conference, coordinated by MP Fiona Bruce, UK Special Envoy on FoRB, and the FCDO team (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), was to identify what is working in different countries as regards FoRB, explore where and how we can apply new lessons and approaches and inspire the next generation to champion and defend FoRB for everyone all around the world.

A day after the conference, the UK government organized a meeting with some relevant stakeholders, for a "Strategic Discussion on Next Steps", to cover scene-setting reflections and practical steps after the Ministerial.

The strategic discussion on the next steps meeting counted among the respondents Mervyn Thomas (Chair of the UK FoRB Forum), Lord Alton of Liverpool (Vice-Chair of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on International FoRB), Greg Mitchell (Chair of the US International Religious Freedom Roundtable Secretariat), Nadine Maenza (former Chair of US Commission on International Religious Freedom), Jos Douma (Netherlands Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief) Sam Brownback (former US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom), Chris Seiple from the Institute of Global Engagement, and Jim Shannon (Co-Chair of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on International FoRB). Other subjects discussed were "Civil Society, Parliamentarians and Academics", "FoRB and the Media" and "Funding FoRB".

Opening ceremony

The opening plenary titled "FoRB, a right for everyone everywhere" started with a choir made up of about 30 refugees of many faiths from a wide range of countries. There were video addresses by Prince Charles and then Prime Minister Boris Johnson. There were also speeches by Lord Ahmad, former Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB and now Minister for Human Rights, by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury since 2013 and other representatives of various faiths as well as humanism. The concluding speech was held by Mary Elizabeth Truss, a candidate to the succession of Boris Johnson and a Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs since 2021 and a Minister for Women and Equalities since 2019.

Discussion panels

Discussion panels with the participation of scholars and practitioners on the ground covered three main issues related to FoRB: prevention, protection and promotion.

The section devoted to the prevention of the degradation of FoRB was divided in four sessions: FoRB in times of conflict and insecurity - Civil society as a driver for change - FoRB and the media - Early warning prevention.

The part on the protection of FoRB was divided into three sessions: Protecting cultural and religious heritage - Inspiring Parliamentarians - Declaration on Humanity.

The section on the promotion of FoRB covered the following issues: Innovation Hub: FoRB in the Future - Engaging the next generation - FoRB in education - Promoting FoRB in the face of global challenges - Promoting FoRB in the digital world.

All these panels were of very high quality and a source of inspiration both for country delegates and civil society organizations.

The closing plenary panel discussion was titled "Reflections and the way forward."

Statements by states' delegates

Soothing statements – 3 to 5 minutes each - were made by representatives of about 40 states to praise their national policies concerning the protection and the promotion of FoRB at home and abroad.ⁱ Their self-praising declarations could have been more effectively replaced by sessions privileging public and private interactions between NGOs and state delegates.

A few international institutions such as the UN Alliance of Civilizations, Council of Europe, European Union also made statements. Strange though it may be, it is to be noted that the OSCE/ ODIHR was absent from this part of the Ministerial and was given an event at the Civil Society limited area.

Instrumentalisation of the Ministerial by States self-praising their policies

A few examples of the self-promotion and political instrumentalization by some of the 40 participating statesⁱⁱ.

H.E. Ambassador of France, Jean-Christophe Peaucelle, Advisor for Religious Affairs, limited himself to a brief and very general speech recalling the fundamental principles of freedom of conscience and belief as enshrined in the French constitution and rooted in the *laïcité*. His statement did not go beyond a simple statement praising France

for defending religious freedom at home and abroad but he avoided quite a number of controversial issues, such as the law on separatism obviously targeting Muslims and the anti-cult policies stigmatizing minority religious and belief groups for over two decades.

Ambassador of Greece to the UK, H.E. Mr Ioannis Raptakis reaffirmed his commitment to combating anti-Semitism and stressed Greece's full respect for the rights of Muslims, pointing out that his country had more mosques than any other European country, which is not proven. He also condemned the transformation of the status of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to an active mosque in Istanbul. And he reaffirmed his full support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate which has been strangled for decades by the Turkish authorities. In the background of this intervention, the permanent issues of tension with Turkey, a country with a Muslim majority and a secular enemy of Greece, loomed large.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, H.E. Péter Szijjártó praised the country's Christian roots, thanks to which it had been able to resist several invasions and retain its identity. The defence of Catholic Christianity was at the centre of his speech. In ten years, 3,000 Catholic churches have been built in the Hungarian-populated regions of Central Europe and the number of Catholic schools has doubled, he said. Hungary's two priorities are the fight against the persecution of Christians in the world and aggressive secularism. An aid programme, "Hungary Helps", has been financed for 500,000 persecuted Christians in the world, including their resettlement in their countries of origin from which they had to flee. Apart from the sole defense of Christians, he avoided explaining why some minority groups cannot fully enjoy freedom of religion or belief and are discriminated against.

Finland's State Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, H.E. Johanna Sumuvuori focused on the intersection between religious freedom and LGBT, violence against women and reproductive rights. She also stressed that Finland defends religious freedom in the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the UN. However, she avoided addressing attempts to criminalise the freedom of expression of a Christian Finnish MP on a controversial issue which led to a trial that the politician finally won.

Complaints of NGOs and recommendations

The registration for the access to the Queen Elizabeth II Center was denied, without any convincing reasons, to many NGOs who had applied for it. Others got the privilege to have full access to the events held on the ground-floor. A third group of NGOs were parked on the first floor of the building without any authorization to join the attendees of the discussion panels and official country delegations; public or private interaction between the representatives of these NGOs was impossible.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) which had not applied for registration at the Ministerial was told about a number of common recriminations from NGOs:

"We never got an answer when we tried to apply."

"We wonder why some NGOs were registered while other were not. What are the real reasons hidden between such discrimination?"

"I know a case where a local faith leader whose name was proposed only few days before the conference got full access to all the events of the Ministerial while I was left outside although I had applied three weeks in advance. When I tried to go to the ground-floor to talk with some officials and panelists, I was not allowed to get in although 80% of the seats were empty."

“It was weird to see that some of the participants were limited to the ground and first floors, while others like me had access to the upper levels where you could meet with officials. You could not see the criteria that were used to discriminate that way, and in fact, there was no reason for this. It would have been much better to have everyone with the same access, in an all-inclusive way.”

In conclusion, while the Ministerial was a big success in terms of content, a lot more needed to be done at the organizational level, in terms of transparency and equal opportunities for all.

Unfortunate was also the decision to organize a program of side events for NGOs on the same two days as the Ministerial at another prestigious location, the British Parliament. They could have been held before or as a follow up of the Ministerial and civil society organizations would have maximized their participation. One can wonder about the reasons for a choice of overlapping agendas. The publicity about this parallel conference for NGOs, which was open to all without any distinction or restriction, was also a success as members of the Parliament attended, chaired or sponsored the events, and here interacted with all civil society organizations.

It is to be hoped that the criticisms and problematic issues raised by grassroots activists will be heard and taken into account for the next Ministerial, whoever will organize it.

Overall, the great mass for freedom of religion or belief driven by the UK and US governments to ensure that this vital human right be raised, exposed and protected was a very important step in moving the political momentum in the right direction.

¹ Watch the over 60 videos of those statements at <https://vimeo.com/user169814059>

² Order of the list of the videos on Vimeo: United Nations (Alliance of Civilizations) - The United States of America - The Swiss Confederation - The State of Israel - The Republic of Uzbekistan - The Republic of Slovenia - The Republic of Sierra Leone - The Republic of Serbia - The Republic of Poland - The Republic of Malta - The Republic of Madagascar - The Republic of Lithuania - The Republic of Latvia - The Republic of Kazakhstan - The Republic of Finland - The Republic of Cyprus - The Republic of Croatia - The Republic of Costa Rica - The Republic of Colombia - The Republic of Cameroun - The Republic of Austria - The Republic of Armenia - The Republic of Albania - The People's Republic of Bangladesh - The Lebanese Republic - The Kingdom of the Netherlands - The Kingdom of Thailand - The Kingdom of Norway - The Kingdom of Denmark - The Kingdom of Bahrain - The Italian Republic - Hellenic Republic - The French Republic - The Federative Republic of Brazil - The Federal Republic of Nigeria - The Co-operative Republic of Guyana - The Commonwealth of Australia - The Arab Republic of Egypt - Taiwan - Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM) - Slovak Republic - Romania - Hungary - European Union - Council of Europe - Canada.

Intolerance and discrimination against Christians, a new report

Observatory Intolerance Against Christians - (10.06.2022) - **New report finds evidence of self-censorship among Christians in Europe. Case studies of France and Germany show an advanced degree of social pressure driven by secular intolerance. In Mexico and Colombia practicing Christians face similar challenges as in the European countries.**

[A new study, of two European \(France and Germany\) and two Latin American countries \(Colombia and Mexico\)](#), finds that the growing secular intolerance increasingly threatens Christian's freedom of expression. It suggests that the chilling effect and its corollary, self-censorship, among Christians are real. Based on an exploratory and inductive methodology, this research sheds light on the negative effects secular intolerance has on the freedom of expression of actively practicing Christians.

OIDAC Europe, its Latina American partner **OLIRE** and **IIRF** (International Institute for Religious Freedom) have presented today in Vienna a joint report called **Perceptions on Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the "Chilling Effect"**. It summarizes the results of four case studies, each in a different country, conducted through personal interviews with practicing Christians from different sectors of society. The results reveal perceptions of the phenomenon of self-censorship and provide understanding of different contextual nuances.

Madeleine Enzberger, Executive Director of OIDAC Europe, moderated the presentation: *"One of the most worrying and tragic findings of this report is that if the social costs to follow your belief and to express it become too high, people will ultimately abandon their belief. And it is especially younger and uneducated people whose faith is at risk here."*

Friederike Boellmann, one of the three authors, underlined: *"It's not about strict legal cases or persecution even, but every person that I interviewed noticed a change in the climate or a narrowing of the opinion corridor. It was also surprising to find that the German case reveals Universities as the most hostile environment. And the largest extent of self-censorship I found in my research in the academic realm."*

The report is the result of extensive qualitative research, conducted in 4 countries, and builds upon a decade of research about secular intolerance. **France and Germany were picked as examples for European countries with an advanced degree of secularization. Mexico and Colombia face very similar challenges as the European countries.** In the case of France and Germany, authors noted that the "chilling effect" was mostly caused by the cultural mindset, rather than the current legal landscape.

The results were discussed by six experts: Dennis Petri, Editor of the report and International Director of IIRF; Friederike Boellmann, a sociologist and author of the German case study; Simon Calvert from *The Christian Institute*(UK); Teresa Flores,

Director of OLIRE (*Observatorio de Libertad Religiosa en América Latina*); Paul Rowe, Professor for Political and International Studies at Trinity Western University, Canada; and Janet Epp-Buckingham, Executive Editor of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom*.

Summarizing the cases in Mexico and Colombia, **Teresa Flores** concluded that: "We can say that the phenomenon of self-censorship is not only configured when a Christian does not openly manifest his faith and religious convictions but also refers to situations in which Christians cannot express their faith-based points of view on controversial issues. The research reveals that social pressure is also a very influential factor of self-censorship."

Dennis P. Petri, editor of the report, commented: "We know about the court cases, the threats, etc. We know where secular intolerance comes from, we know how it manifests itself, but we don't know its intensity. We have a hard time engaging its scope and to try to determine how it affects the Church and Christian life. The problem with secular intolerance and with self-censorship is that it happens very often but on a small scale. But all those small incidents kind of add up. And that's when we can use this analogy of "death by a thousand cuts". One small cut doesn't kill you, but thousand cuts can. It can damage religious freedom."

Talking about his experience, **Simon Calvert** narrated: "One of the most common questions we get asked is along the lines of "Can I say X"; "Is it legal for me to express a Christian view about Abortion or Sexuality and Gender?". And informed Christians are asking this quite seriously: "Are there laws to prevent us from expressing a Christian view about Same-Sex Marriage, or about Gender?" That's the level of self-censorship that we've reached where people think that it must somehow be against the law to express these views and of course it is not."

Paul Rowe gave an overview of similar dynamics happening in Canada and concluded: "Freedom of religion and believe is not a political plot of some sort, associated with only one type of believe or religion, but it is in fact a value that should be held up by everyone no matter their religion or believe, or lack of it."

Ms. Enzlberger added that "These findings should not lead to fear, division, or resentment, but rather to a better understanding of how much we need a pluralistic society, where everyone can speak without fear of repercussion and live out their faith without being discriminated against."

Closing the Panel, **Janet-Epp Buckingham** said: "We often think of religious persecution as being – you know – people who are jailed or facing criminal charges, or even facing death for their faith. But in secular countries there is this "death by a thousand cuts" in the sense of being having numerous smaller matters adding up to the larger issue of feeling under pressure for your faith and thereby having this chilling effect that "I can't say anything about my faith". The case in Mexico shows that children in school are afraid that they will be bullied and people are afraid that in their job they won't get a promotion."

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Religious Freedom: Stories of distant and forgotten conflicts, stories of the believers of a “Lesser God”

By MEP Carlo Fidanza

The European Times (12.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3jz1rVp> - Ever since the eyes of the world have turned to the conflict in Ukraine, it is difficult to speak of religious freedom.

First the covid, and then the war have hidden the minor but no less serious tragedies that are perpetuated in the rest of the globe, the suffering that continues to be perpetrated at the expense of the weakest.

For a moment we realized what the state of the art on religious freedom was, when last summer NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan, and suddenly we were plunged back into a dark time of segregation and discrimination. A time of persecution against those whose only fault is that they believe in their own God or because of their own being.

We realized that in certain parts of the world, being a woman or being a Christian, is still a guilt. This for example is the story of Zabi, whose story was told to us by the NGO Open doors, the story of a young Afghan Christian woman who fled following the capture of the Taliban

Zabi* is a refugee who had to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban take-over. She's single, still quite young and well-educated. She was active in the area of human rights and therefore a target for the Taliban.

But being an activist and fighting for her ideals is not Zabi's only fault.

Zabi has many sins, including that of being born a woman and a Christian.

The Taliban already know who she is and what she does because already five years ago they killed her father for his faith, only after having tortured him for several months. And unfortunately the tragedies for Zabi do not end here.

Only two years ago, her brother also disappeared. Like Zabi, he was a believer. We don't know if she has other siblings, but Zabi's mother is still alive. She's not Christian.

The story of Zabi is not the only one. There are many other stories, very similar, stories that are lost in the speed of modernity and in a world where priorities are those that make it to the front page.

So, it is precisely these stories, those of which it is impossible to know the epilogue.

We know, for example, that many of these refugees, after the seizure of Kabul, fled to Pakistan in the hope of a better future. And that right here, they found themselves if not in hell, certainly in purgatory.

Even in Pakistan, in fact, there is no rest for persecuted Christians.

With the intergroup, we managed to bring to the attention of European institutions, the infamy of the anti-blasphemy laws that claim victims every day in this part of the world. Thanks to our actions, we have been able to save the couple Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, in prison for 8 years, with the only fault of being Christians.

But that's not enough. The Intergroup receives reports on a daily basis, not least that of Shazhad Masih for whom the Intergroup has made several moves to try to get a resolution on the agenda of the Parliament's plenary session.

The story of Shazhad Masih was brought to the attention of the Intergroup by the NGO European Centre for Justice and Law. Shazhad is a 22-year-old young Christian man who has been in Pakistani prisons for five years, allegedly accused of being a blasphemer. In 2017, while at work - at the time of the events Shazhad was working in a hospital as a janitor - Shazhad got into an argument with one of his Muslim colleagues. Shortly after the dispute, the situation escalated and Shazhad was arrested.

From that moment, it also became impossible to get a date for a hearing. A hearing that to this day continues to be postponed.

There are several reasons why it is difficult to bring this case to the attention of European institutions and to have a hearing in Pakistani courts.

First of all, even before the recent developments in Pakistan, the situation regarding the blasphemy laws was complex. The Pakistani administration itself is in fact hostage to radicalized segments of the population that strenuously defend the anti-blasphemy laws and therefore fear that by freeing an alleged blasphemy offender, protests will arise.

At the European level, the intergroup does its best to carry on battles related to religion. However, it often encounters a relativist culture. A culture that permeates the European institution and that wants to relegate any discussion on religion to a mere private matter, not realizing that, by doing so, they are not even able to establish clear boundaries and limits for negotiations with third countries.

The hope, therefore, is that as soon as possible the European institutions will awaken from this torpor and begin to make their full weight - political and economic - felt in these negotiations, so that the lives of those who want to live in their own lands and who still look to this continent with hope, are protected.

Carlo Fidanza

Co-chair of the The Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance of the European Parliament

Photo: Tim Marshall

Freedom of religion or belief in sharp decline in Asia, a European Parliament report says

The European Times (25.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3iIGff3> - On 22 March, MEPs Peter Van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza made public their 45-page [report](#) "The EU and Freedom of Religion or Belief 2017-2021" at the European Parliament in Brussels.

Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, was invited as a guest speaker to share his views about the situation in Asia.

"First of all, I would like to very warmly congratulate the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the European Parliament and the authors of this extremely well-documented report which highlights the accelerated decline of religious freedom in a number of countries.

*I have been asked to share my views on this issue in Asia, a huge continent. One thing is very disturbing in the report. Among the 11 countries selected by the Intergroup for the deterioration level of religious freedom, 8 are from Asia: **Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, Turkey and Vietnam**. A couple of them are Communist countries and the others have a dominant religion enjoying the support of the state and public institutions, either Sunni or Shia Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism.*

These Asian countries total a population of 3.4 billion people, which represents 42% of the world population.

Religious minorities in such contexts are vulnerable to all sorts of arbitrary restrictions, discrimination, social hostility, violence and killings.

The increasing denial of freedom of religion or belief covers a wide range of issues:

***In Pakistan**, where the dominant religion is Sunni Islam, Ahmadis are banned as a heretical group. There are also laws criminalizing apostasy and alleged blasphemous behaviours punishable by life imprisonment and even by death.*

In our database of religious prisoners, we have documented cases of 16 Ahmadis and 26 Protestants, a number of them being on the death row.

In practice, there are forced conversions of young girls from non-Muslim minorities after they have been kidnapped and forcefully married to Muslim men.

There is also a persistent climate of extreme social hostility and mob violence against Christians and Ahmadis leading to killings.

***In India**, where Hinduism is the dominant religion, anti-conversion and anti-blasphemy laws similarly breach the right to change religion and restrict various forms of expression about religious issues.*

Discriminatory laws inspired by religious nationalism negatively impact the lives of non-Hindu citizens and residents in India, leading to hostility, tensions and mob violence against Muslims and Christians.

Laws denying access to foreign funding have forced Amnesty International to close its office in India and have restricted the health and education activities of religious caritative institutions.

In Iran, all laws and regulations are based on Islamic criteria and the Sharia is strictly applied. This results in religious minorities, especially Christians, Baha'í and non-Shi'a Muslim minorities, being persecuted by the government and being subject to unjustified prison sentences. Muslims are prohibited to change or renouncing their religious beliefs and proselytizing or just attempting to convert Muslims is punishable by death. In our database of religious prisoners, we have 51 documented cases of Baha'ís, 12 Christians and 7 Sufis.

In Myanmar, there is the extreme and persistent persecution of the predominantly Muslim Rohingya community, resulting in violence and a massive exodus of Rohingyas into neighbouring country Bangladesh, which has been going on since 2016. Last year, the military grabbed power and went on fueling Burmese Buddhist nationalism, which leads to violence and discrimination, especially towards Muslims and to a lesser extent Christians.

In Turkey, increasing religious nationalism is also propagated by the government. Under president Erdoğan, Erdoğan is publicly targeting atheists, Christians and Jews.

This hostility comes in the form of lacking protection and government support for minority religious sites. The famous Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was even converted from an Orthodox Christian church into a mosque. Furthermore, the government is implementing a ban on foreign religious workers, such as Christian evangelists, which is also leading to their expulsion.

In Vietnam, an atheist Communist country, the government is actively persecuting religious minority groups, in particular those which are denied registration imposed by a law since 2018 on the ground of national interest, public order or national unity. This mainly concerns Christians from the Hmong and Montagnard minorities as well as Buddhists from the An Dan Dai Dao and the Hoa Hoa groups who refuse to declare loyalty to the Communist Party. In our database of religious prisoners, we have documented cases of 26 Buddhists, 8 Protestants and 2 Catholics.

In Afghanistan, even before the shift in power last year, Islamic doctrines were already incorporated into the country's laws. This resulted in the criminalization of blasphemy and apostasy with the possibility of the death penalty as a result. The situation has become ever more concerning since the Taliban reclaimed power after the allied forces left the country in the summer of 2021.

Last but not least

In China, the government is becoming more and more authoritarian in all its policies, enforcing a so-called sinicization of society, in which religion is seen as a threat to the official atheist ideology.

Under the guise of sinicization, Xi Jinping has banned a number of so-called undesirable religious groups and reinforced the full control of the Chinese Communist Party over all sectors of society, including all religious groups.

One or two million Uyghur Muslims have been and are allegedly politically reeducated in detention camps. All religious groups have people in prison, especially those that are banned like Falun Gong."

MEPs Van Dalen and Fidanza launch a worrying report on FoRB in 2017-2021

See the 45-page report [here](#)

1. FOREWORD & INTRODUCTION

The Freedom of religion or belief

The Intergroup

Purpose of this report

Methodology and reading guide

Standing up for the right to freedom of religion or belief

2. STATE OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AROUND THE WORLD

General developments

Country-specific evaluation *India - China - Nigeria - Iran - Pakistan - Algeria - Myanmar- Turkey- Eritrea- Vietnam- Afghanistan*

Stories of hope

3. THE ROLE OF THE EU IN PROMOTING AND PROTECTING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AROUND THE WORLD

The involvement of the European Council and the Council of the EU in promoting and protecting the freedom of religion or belief

European Parliament's engagement to promoting and protecting the freedom of religion or belief

European Parliament urgency resolutions

The EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief

Trade relations including the generalised scheme of preferences

The EU Special Envoy on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union

Conclusion

4. RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EFFORTS IN PROMOTING AND PROTECTING THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The European Council and the Council of the EU

The European Commission:

- *The EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union*
- *The European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU representations in third countries*
- *Promoting and protecting religious freedom in trade relations*

The European Parliament

ANNEXES

Annex 1 - Questionnaire and list of respondents

Annex 2 - Overview of the European Parliament's initiatives relating to the freedom of religion or belief 2017-2021

Annex 3 - Overview of Council initiatives relating to the freedom of religion or belief 2017-2021

Bibliography

The European Times/ HRWF (28.03.2022) - The FoRB report, which outlines the "[state of the art of religious freedom in the world](#)" and discusses the "European institutions' actions to protect religious freedom", was drafted in collaboration with some of the most important associations and NGOs in the sector, involving "different representatives of the faiths, from Christian associations to Baha'i, Muslims and Jews".

In addition to the co-chairs of the intergroup **Peter VAN DALEN** (EPP) and **Carlo FIDANZA** (FdI- Ecr) who opened the session, other speakers were **Iannis Argyropoulos**, Head of Unit for Asia-Pacific and South Asia Regional Affairs of the **European External Action Service**; ; **Marcela Szymanski**, editor-in-chief of the "**Religious Freedom in the World**" dossier at the Pontifical Foundation **Aid to the Church in Need** and **Willy Fautre**, Director of **Human Rights Without Frontiers** and **Oksana Oleynikova**, director of the **Good Shepherd** children's home in Ukraine, who "updated the audience on the current situation in Ukraine.

Peter VAN DALEN, co-chair of the Intergroup since its inception ten years ago, started by saying that "*The EU needs to enhance its efforts in promoting and protecting freedom of [religion](#) or belief, as it is deteriorating in many countries. In EU policy, too often economic interests prevail over [human rights](#) commitments. Therefore, the European Commission must reappoint a Special Envoy for the promotion and protection for the freedom of religion or belief as soon as possible.*"

Co-chair Carlo FIDANZA recalled that among those persecuted for their faith, "*over 360 million Christians experience a high level of persecution and discrimination. Today the eyes of the world are rightly focused on the martyrdom of Mariupol,*" FIDANZA said, "*but with this report, we want to turn the spotlight on another martyrdom that takes place every day in total indifference and which affects millions of believers.*"

And FIDANZA added: "*As Peter VAN DALEN said, in most countries, we can see that both a very dominant religious majority (often Islamic, e.g. Pakistan) or a rather authoritarian government (e.g. China) are the main drivers of persecution of religious minorities. Often we can also see a combination of these two (e.g. Iran, Turkey).*"

The report, which has just been published by the FoRB intergroup, selects 11 countries that, according to the NGOs participating in the survey, are the countries where religious freedom is increasingly restricted.

Among them China, where forced Sinicisation is underway at the expense of Uyghur Muslims, Falun Gong practitioners, Christians and of course Tibetan Buddhists.

In Nigeria, President Buhari has worked to foster an islamisation of the country and Christians are mainly persecuted by jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, Iswap and local warlords.

In Pakistan, the majority of the Sunni population is aggressive towards minorities and anti-blasphemy laws are often misused to settle scores with non-Muslim competitors in business.

Last but not least, the press release of the Intergroup also focuses on Algeria, Myanmar, Eritrea, Vietnam and Turkey where President Erdogan promotes Sunni Islamisation policies at the expense of atheists, Christians and Jews.

In the Q&A part of the launch event, MEP Carlo FIDANZA stressed that the Intergroup "will continue taking the initiative to address the situation of persecuted minorities worldwide" and "will keep pushing for a quick reappointment of a Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU", a position efficiently occupied by [Jan Figel](#) from 2016 to 2019, and left vacant since then... Where there is no political will, there is no way.

European Parliament denounces persecution of religious minorities worldwide

ECR Group at the EP (15.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3s39Zs9> - Today, the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee adopted [ECR rapporteur Karol Karski's own-initiative report on the persecution of minorities](#) on the grounds of faith or religion. In the text, MEPs support and protect the rights of persecuted believers around the world, pointing out that the level of violence in some regions may constitute crimes against humanity or even genocide.

"I am glad that my report has received such broad support, because it touches on a very serious problem. Research shows that freedom of religion or belief is violated in nearly one-third of all countries in the world, and more than 5 billion people live in countries that mandate or tolerate serious violations of freedom of religion or belief," said Karski following the vote.

Karski would have liked the report to have gone a step further by naming the actors in the persecution of believers:

"In my opinion, we should also have exposed the main perpetrators in the persecution of believers and the countries in which religious minorities are most oppressed, but unfortunately we didn't find a common approach here."

As a result of amendments introduced by left-wing MEPs, the report's focus shifted from presenting specific examples of religious groups, particularly Christians, as the group

most affected by persecution, to a more general approach. "That's a shame, because I think there's enough evidence of gross violations of the rights of people belonging to the four largest religious groups in the world: Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, to name just these," Karol Karski said.

The document was adopted by a majority of 59 in favour, 1 vote against and 13 abstentions.

UN report decries persecution of Baha'is across MENA region

The [report](#) (link is external) and [annex](#) (link is external) are available online at the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Bahá'í International Community (11.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3tUCwQP> - A new report and its annex, "Rights of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities in situations of conflict or insecurity", by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, has highlighted the "increasing insecurity that Baha'í communities experience" in a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. The annex is the first time such a document has given exclusive focus to the situation of the Baha'is in several countries.

The Special Rapporteur's report was released during the 49th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The annex, which said that concerns regarding the Baha'is "have persisted and even escalated across several country contexts", was based on a November 2021 symposium for international organisations and governments, UN experts, members of civil society and representatives of the Baha'í International Community (BIC).

"Dr Ahmed Shaheed's report illustrates the perilous situation Baha'is face in Iran and Yemen," said Bani Dugal, the BIC's Principal Representative to the United Nations, "and the discrimination they face in Qatar and Tunisia. We hope they will inform the actions of Human Rights Council members and remind the authorities that the world is watching."

Baha'is lack legal recognition in Iran and Yemen, the annex said, where they are persecuted, and in Qatar and Tunisia, where Baha'is have suffered discrimination. The annex noted that a lack of recognition exposed Baha'is to violations of their basic rights.

Activities of Baha'is in "manifesting" their faith, according to Dr Shaheed, are criminalised in Iran. Laws added to Iran's penal code in 2021 may also criminalise expressing Baha'í beliefs or even identifying as a Baha'í. The "discrimination against and persecution of Baha'is is State-driven and systematic", the annex said, and Baha'is "reportedly have experienced violence and restrictions on manifesting their faith" in particular if these are seen to contradict Islamic principles". Baha'is also face discrimination in accessing education and employment and were "subject to smear campaigns and speech that may incite violence against them based on their faith identity".

In Yemen, the "discrimination, hostility, and violence against the Baha'í community is reportedly systematic", the annex said, adding that Houthi leaders have "called for the arrest of Baha'is based on their faith identity, with some already convicted, others deported, their gatherings raided, institutions banned and attempts underway in the courts to seize their properties". Yemenis had also been incited to "engage in violence" against Baha'is in a televised speech by the Houthi leader.

Dr Shaheed, in an indirect reference to Iran, also noted concerns over “rising influence of external actors in Yemen” which may be exacerbating these challenges.

Baha’is in Qatar are in “a precarious situation”, the annex said, due to “administrative deportations and blacklisting resulting in loss of employment, income, and separation of families”. And in Tunisia the annex said that the government had refused to recognise the Baha’i community. During legal appeals brought by Baha’is, it was reported, “discriminatory claims about the precepts of the Baha’i belief, in addition to unfounded concerns relating to national security and social peace” were expressed.

Dr Shaheed’s report stressed that “State and non-State actors have exploited the identity of religious or belief minorities to further their political, economic, and military objectives”, adding that Baha’is in Iran and Yemen have been targeted “through hateful rhetoric that seeks to mobilize the public against them and ‘legitimize’ policies and practices that harm them ... authorities and others have accused the Baha’i community of being foreign agents or enemies of the State, including ... Israeli spies”.

The report said that targeting Baha’is in this way entrenched widespread “fear, suspicion, and discrimination ... leaving many members of the Baha’i community feeling more fearful and exposed to violence”.

The report also included several recommendations. UN Member-States were encouraged to “recall their international human rights obligations towards religious minorities”, including the Baha’is; relevant agencies within the UN system were encouraged to “adopt a more cohesive and coordinated approach” in responding to the situation facing religious minorities; and both States and civil society were asked to consider establishing new “platforms” to advocate for the rights of the Baha’is such as a “friends of Baha’is” working group.

The [report\(link is external\)](#) and [annex\(link is external\)](#) are available online at the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Background

Iran

- The Baha’is are Iran’s largest non-Muslim religious minority and have been systematically persecuted by the government since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.
- More than 200 Baha’is were executed in the years after the Islamic Revolution.
- A 1991 policy document signed by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called for the progress and development of Iran’s Baha’i community to be “blocked” and for Baha’is to be denied education and livelihoods. Thousands of articles of propaganda against the Baha’is are published in Iran’s state media each year.
- Hundreds of Baha’i-owned private properties, including homes, small businesses and farms, have been confiscated since the Islamic Revolution.
- See BIC.org for comprehensive information on the persecution of the Baha’is in Iran: <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais>

Yemen

- In Yemen the Houthis have been persecuting Baha’is and its leaders have used rhetoric and tactics which are very similar to those seen in Iran. Yemeni Baha’is have faced arrest, imprisonment, torture and risk of execution.

- See BIC.org for comprehensive information on the persecution of the Baha'is in Yemen: <https://www.bic.org/situation-in-yemen/reports-situation-yemen>

Qatar

- Baha'is have lived in Qatar for almost a century—decades before the country gained independence in 1971. In recent decades the Baha'i community has suffered instances of discrimination, restrictions and human rights violations. The cumulative effect of these acts has now become untenable because they threaten the viability of the community.
- Baha'is face discrimination in employment, non-renewal of work permits, expulsions and blacklisting. They have also experienced attacks on their cemeteries.
- The BIC and the Baha'i community of Qatar have made several attempts to engage the Qatari government directly on this issue. Despite repeated promises made by the government to look into the matter, the situation has continued to deteriorate.

Tunisia

- Tunisian Baha'is have long been an integral part of Tunisian society and have contributed to the wellbeing of the country, including to issues of coexistence, such as in the drafting of Article 6 of the 2014 Constitution following the Jasmine Revolution of 2011. But more recently, the Tunisian government has been officially opposed to the recognition of Baha'is and have appealed a past court decision to allow the registration.
- Both the Mufti of the Republic and the Minister of Religious Affairs have labelled the Baha'is as infidels.
- Baha'is have not been able to bury their deceased according to Baha'i burial rites because the government has not allotted them their own cemeteries – despite the fact that they are also not permitted to use Muslim cemeteries.

Photo: Dr Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur, Freedom of Religion or Belief

In and out of prison in January 2022

HRWF (07.02.2022) – Some news from the prisons in China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia in January 2022.

CHINA: [Yu CHEN, a Protestant, sentenced to seven years in prison](#)

A Chinese Christian online bookstore owner, Chen Yu, was charged with “illegal business operations” on September 27, 2021. He was sentenced to seven years in prison and fined 200,000 RMB (\$29,450 USD).

According to a [document](#) from the People’s Court of Linhai City. Additionally, the 12,864 Christian books from his bookstore were to be destroyed by the Linhai City Public Security Bureau.

CHINA: [5 Muslim women sentenced to prison terms](#)

5 female Uyghur Muslims sentenced to prison terms: 7 to 20 years

I think that in the column #of arrests, you should write 5, have all the full names in the same box. See what is best. We can talk online if you need help.

IRAN: [Conditional release of 9 Christians](#)

Muslim converts Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, Shahrooz Eslamdoust, Behnam Akhlaghi, Babak Hosseinzadeh, Mehdi Khatibi, Khalil Dehghanpour, Hossein Kadivar, Kamal Naamanian and Mohammad Vafadar were conditionally released following a Supreme Court ruling but two weeks later, [Ali Haghnejad](#) was sent back to prison!!!

IRAN: [Hadi Rahimi starting his prison term](#)

Christian convert Hadi (Moslem) Rahimi has begun serving his four-year prison sentence for “acting against national security” by attending a house-church and “spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity”.

PAKISTAN: [Zafar Bhatti sentenced to death](#)

A Christian man, Zafar Bhatti, 58, has been sentenced to death by the Pakistan session court of Rawalpindi, after being charged with blasphemy in 2012.

On July 22, 2012, Bhatti, a pastor, was arrested after being accused of sending text messages insulting the Prophet Muhammad's mother. There are reports that Bhatti was tortured into confessing.

On May 3, 2017, Bhatti was sentenced to life in prison for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad" (Sec. 295-C).

On June 22, 2021, Bhatti's conviction was upheld by a sessions court judge in the Rawalpindi District.

In January 2022, the British Asian Christian Association reported that the Rawalpindi Sessions Court had sentenced Bhatti to death.

PAKISTAN: [Release of Nadeem Samson](#)

In a historic ruling for Pakistan, Nadeem Samson, jailed over a rent dispute, has been released on bail. However, the chances of him being found innocent have not increased. According to lawyer Saif ul Malook, the decision could serve as a precedent for other victims.

PAKISTAN: Aneeqa Ateeq, a Muslim woman sentenced to death (Blasphemy)

On January 19, 2022, Aneeqa Ateeq, a 26-year-old woman was sentenced to death by the Trial Court of Rawalpindi after she had been accused by a man called Hasnat Farooq of sharing via WhatsApp with him blasphemous messages and caricatures

RUSSIA: Two more Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to a prison term, Korotun and Kolesnichenko

On January 20, 2022, the Seversky City Court found Jehovah's Witness Yevgeny Korotun guilty of organizing the activities of an extremist organization under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code and sentenced to seven years in prison with subsequent restriction of liberty for two years and a five-year ban on working in educational institutions and "placement of any educational information", including on the Internet.

On the same day, the Seversky City Court found another Jehovah's Witness, Andrei Kolesnichenko, guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code. He was sentenced to four years in prison with subsequent restriction of liberty for a year.

RUSSIA: Alexei Ershov and Maksim Beltikov, the first two Jehovah's Witnesses sent to prison in 2022

A court in Seversk sentenced this 68-year old Jehovah's Witness to three years in a penal colony.

On 19 January 2022, Judge of the Seversky City Court of the Tomsk Region Yalchin Badalov found 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness Alexei Ershov guilty of participating in "extremist activities" (Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code) and sentenced him to three years in a penal colony. A week before, [Maksim Nikolayevich Beltikov](#) was sentenced to two years in prison for discussing the Bible.

Photo : dehradun9319700701.blogspot.com

The Universal Peace Federation: Moon front or respected NGO? A white paper

Bitter Winter (07.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/34hDzI7> - On September 12, 2021, an event called "Think Tank 2022 Rally of Hope" was organized in South Korea. Due to the COVID-19 situation, it was a virtual event, live-streamed throughout the world. Because of the different time zones, the morning of September 12 in South Korea corresponded to the late afternoon or evening of September 11 in different parts of the United States. One of the (virtual) speakers at the event, which focused on the situation of world peace and the

possibility of a peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula, was former American President Donald J. Trump.

The organizer of the event in South Korea was the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), an entity founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) and his wife Hak Ja Han Moon. Trump was criticized in the United States as he did not attend the official commemoration of the victims of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, as if he regarded the Korean event as more important. In fact, the Rally of Hope's date was September 12, and the day had been picked up as the anniversary of the UPF foundation in 2005, although it was broadcasted in the U.S. on September 11. According to the UPF, Trump had recorded his speech in August, two weeks before the event.

Media criticism quickly became international. It escalated to a campaign putting together two groups not exactly popular with most media, Trump and his followers and "cults," as the founders of the UPF were also the founders of the Unification Church, one of the main targets of the anti-cult movement.

[Read the whole White Paper here](#)

Excerpt

"Large UPF conferences gathered former (and sometimes current) presidents and prime ministers of different countries, as well as religious and cultural leaders. These gatherings included the Continental Africa Peace Summit 2018, inaugurated in Dakar, Senegal on January 18, 2018; the South-East Europe Peace Summit, opened in Tirana, Albania, on October 26, 2019; the Asia Pacific Summit, which started in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on November 19, 2019; the Africa Continental Summit Niger 2019, whose opening ceremony was held in Niamey, Niger, on November 28, 2019; the World Summit 2019 in Seoul, South Korea, on February 7–9, 2019; the World Summit 2020, which also took place in Seoul on February 3–8, 2020. Regional meetings were also organized, including the recent Balkans Leadership Conference, organized in Tirana, Albania, on November 20–21, 2021, which led to the signature of a Memorandum of Cooperation between the UPF and the Podgorica Club, an organization established in 2019 by former presidents of Southeast European countries.

The UPF is active through a number of specialized organizations, each of which holds its own events:

- The International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP)
- The International Summit Council for Peace (ISCP)
- The International Association of First Ladies for Peace (IAFLP)
- The Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD)
- The International Media Association for Peace (IMAP)
- The International Association of Academicians for Peace (IAAP)

- The International Association for Peace and Economic Development (IAED)

The International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) was launched on February 15, 2016, at the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea. It gathers parliamentarians from all around the world, and organizes forums promoting peace and democracy, and fighting corruption. National meetings of IAPP members have been organized in such diverse locations as Manila, London, Rome and Asunción, and the association has emerged as one of the largest and most active branches of the UPF. In the United States, the inaugural meeting was hosted by then pro tempore President of the Senate, Orrin Hatch. (...)

[Read the whole White Paper here](#)

Conclusion: Why Do They Do It?

The UPF is a huge network, and the Ambassadors for Peace come from very different nations, cultures, and religions. Those who have studied such organizations know that it is difficult, if not impossible, to gather a large number of diverse people under the flag of a common ideology.

Yet, if there is no full-blown ideology, there are certainly values proposed by the UPF. A basic idea is that world peace comes through dialogue, cooperation, service to others, and actions guided by morality. Obviously, the UPF is aware of the fact that in our pluralistic society very different ideas of morality coexist. The UPF tries to promote the general principle that morality has a spiritual dimension, and we are all part of “one human family under God.” This may in fact displease atheists, although dialogue with humanists and atheists is not excluded from the scope of UPF activities.

The formula “one human family under God” is part of Reverend Moon’s legacy, as is an emphasis on the family as the school where love and peace can be learned. However, the formula can be interpreted differently by Unificationists and non-Unificationists. Members of the Unification Church conceive the “one family” as a community acknowledging Reverend and Mrs. Moon as the True Parents, with a messianic role for our era. On the other hand, acknowledging the messianic role of the Moons is not necessary to believe that we are all part of one human family and should behave as such. This is an ideal that may appeal to women and men of all faiths.

One should not confuse the motivations of those promoting certain charitable and peace activities with the nature and effects of those activities. To use again an example we mentioned previously, the Vatican executives and Catholic priests who launched and lead Caritas Internationalis were and are motivated by a Christian idea of responsibility toward the poor, whom they consider as daughters and sons of God who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. We may also speculate that those Catholic bishops and priests who work today for Caritas hope that their good deeds would benefit the image of the Catholic Church, which has received its good share of negative publicity on other issues. On the other hand, the rules of Caritas Internationalis strictly stipulate that the delivery of humanitarian aid should not be used as a proselytization tool for converting non-Catholics to Catholicism, many who are not Catholics work with Caritas, and its activities are generally praised as highly effective.

Similarly, those Unificationists who lead UPF, work for UPF, and donate to UPF (for which contributions by private donors, both members and non-members of the Unification

Movement are important) are certainly motivated by Reverend and Mrs. Moon's spiritual ideas. They do not hide it, as our analysis of the 2020 event demonstrated. They are also aware that the UPF events benefit the image of Mrs. Moon as a leader with valuable ideas about international issues, which can be appreciated also by many who do not share her theology. On the other hand, it is also true that most of the UPF volunteers and Ambassadors for Peace are not members of the Unification Church, and that the UPF is not intended nor used by its Unificationist members as a tool for proselytism.

Nor is UPF used to promote partisan political ideologies or parties. The expression "reductio ad Hitlerum" is widely used to indicate that to discredit certain movements or politicians their opponents try to associate them, rightly or wrongly, with Nazism. Today it may appear sometimes that there is also a "reductio ad Trump." The former American President is so unpopular among many mainline media that it seems that to disqualify an organization it is enough to associate it with Trump. This is what happened to UPF after the 2021 Rally of Hope. Attacks based on Trump's video participation in the event were either misinformed or malicious. Politicians of all political persuasions participated in this and other UPF events. And, whatever the opinion one may have of Trump, in a conference discussing the relationships between other countries and North Korea, inviting a former American President who had been very much involved in Korean issues should not have been surprising.

In the end, we are left with two irreconcilable narratives about UPF. One is that it is an NGO and think tank whose events are attended by prestigious leaders such as Ban Ki-moon and José Manuel Barroso, and which offers interesting position papers, lectures, and documents on international peace and development issues, including on the relations between North and South Korea. As many other similar organizations, it has been promoted and is led by religionists who do not hide their religious motivations. However, it includes many who do not share their religious beliefs, and is not used as a tool for proselytization. For purposes of converting others to Unificationist theology, the UPF would be a very ineffective tool. Those invited to the UPF activities are mostly political, religious and civil society leaders with well-established ideas and worldviews. They are as far away as possible from the ideal type of the "seeker" looking for a new religion.

This narrative is shared by two organizations unlikely to be engaged in the promotion of "fronts" for "cults": the United Nations and the Vatican. Many new religious movements created charitable and peace-promoting organizations. If they are active enough, and no member state of the United Nations decides to oppose them, they can achieve a Special Consultative Status at the ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) of the U.N. As of January 7, 2022, there were 5,003 organizations with special consultative status at the ECOSOC. However, there were only 140 NGOs with general consultative status (ECOSOC 2022).

General consultative status is reserved, according to the ECOSOC, to "fairly large, established international NGOs with a broad geographical reach," which have offered "substantive and sustained contributions" to the aims of the United Nations in "several fields." In 2018, the UPF was granted general consultative status at the ECOSOC, a position that certainly is not allowed lightly and without a long and accurate observation and evaluation.

Leaders of NGOs and even of new religious movements routinely ask to be received in the Vatican, and have a photo opportunity with the Pope. If they have sponsors the Vatican wants to accommodate, they are normally invited to participate in the general

audiences, where the Pope meets collectively hundreds of people (and may take pictures with some of them).

Private audiences are an entirely different matter, and go through a very complicated process of screening. The Vatican is aware that some organizations may use meetings and pictures for publicity purposes. When a meeting is approved by the Vatican's Secretariat of State, and by the Pope himself, that it happened is publicized through the daily bulletin of the Holy See. The Holy See bulletin for July 1, 2019, duly reported that Pope Francis had met in a private audience "Dr. Thomas G. Walsh, President of the Universal Peace Federation" (Ufficio Stampa della Santa Sede 2019).

Both at the United Nations and in the Vatican, the UPF passed the highest level of screening tests. It would be unconceivable that the skilled U.N. and Vatican diplomats involved were not aware of the connection of the UPF with Reverend and Mrs. Moon. Yet, they concluded, in our opinion correctly, that the UPF was not a proselytizing or publicity arm of the Unification Church but a respected NGO that had proved its usefulness and quality throughout the years.

The second narrative, of which *Paris Match* offered an example, is that the UPF is not what it claims to be but is just a "front" for the "Moon cult" (secte Moon), which hides proselytizing and advertising aims under a façade of care for international issues and humanitarian aid.

This White Paper should have persuaded our readers that the second narrative is both unfair and factually false. It is unfair because similar peace and cultural activities by mainline religions do not receive the same criticism. It is taken for granted that their activities on behalf of peace, dialogue, and social welfare are promoted in good faith, out of a sincere desire for a better world, rather than for self-promotion or proselytization purposes. Only the activities of new religious movements are accused of dissimulating hidden motivations.

Thus, a vicious circle is created. If new religious movements only spend their time in missionary and religious activities, it is objected that this is typical of "cults," while "real" religions care for larger issues and help fellow human beings. If they engage in charitable, social, or cultural activities, it is argued that these are only "fronts" for proselytization and publicity.

The theory that the UPF organizes its activities for proselytization purposes on behalf of the Unification Church is also factually false, and open to empirical disconfirmation. To the best of our knowledge none of the presidents, prime ministers, Nobel Prize laureates, religious leaders, and other participants in the UPF activities converted to the Unification Church. Not only is this theoretically unlikely. It simply did not happen in practice. It would also be difficult to argue that, because of the UPF activities, those who accuse the Unification Church of being "a cult" became less aggressive, and indeed the contrary may well be true.

The conclusion seems to us unescapable. The UPF is an organization that has been founded by Reverend and Mrs. Moon and maintains members of the Unification Church among its leaders, but is supported by the volunteer work of tens of thousands who in their majority are not Unificationists. Its purpose is not to convert others to the Unification Church, nor to support any partisan political perspective, but to promote high-

level discussions about issues connected with world peace, and support in different ways charitable and humanitarian initiatives.

The quality of its work has been recognized, inter alia by the United Nations and the Vatican. To regard the world leaders who participate in its conferences and the more than 100,000 Ambassadors for Peace as "puppets" of a "cult" is more than offensive. It is a ridiculous theory, the fruit of the very bigotry and prejudices international organizations and friends of peace and dialogue should work tirelessly to eliminate.

[Read the whole White Paper here](#)

**Photo : Invitation to "Think Tank 2022 Rally of Hope", on September 12, 2021. Donald Trump was just an online keynote speaker, with José Manuel Barroso, Former President of the European Commission and several others:
Former President of Trinidad and Tobago, Former President of the Philippines, Former President of Serbia, Former Vice-President of India, Prime Minister of Cambodia,...**

ⁱ Watch the over 60 videos of those statements at <https://vimeo.com/user169814059>

ⁱⁱ Order of the list of the videos on Vimeo: United Nations (Alliance of Civilizations) - The United States of America - The Swiss Confederation - The State of Israel - The Republic of Uzbekistan - The Republic of Slovenia - The Republic of Sierra Leone - The Republic of Serbia - The Republic of Poland - The Republic of Malta - The Republic of Madagascar - The Republic of Lithuania - The Republic of Latvia - The Republic of Kazakhstan - The Republic of Finland - The Republic of Cyprus - The Republic of Croatia - The Republic of Costa Rica - The Republic of Colombia - The Republic of Cameroun - The Republic of Austria - The Republic of Armenia - The Republic of Albania - The People's Republic of Bangladesh - The Lebanese Republic - The Kingdom of the Netherlands - The Kingdom of Thailand - The Kingdom of Norway - The Kingdom of Denmark - The Kingdom of Bahrain - The Italian Republic - Hellenic Republic - The French Republic - The Federative Republic of Brazil - The Federal Republic of Nigeria - The Co-operative Republic of Guyana - The Commonwealth of Australia - The Arab Republic of Egypt - Taiwan - Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM) - Slovak Republic - Romania - Hungary - European Union - Council of Europe - Canada.