

UPF Bratislava, Slovakia Symposium Discusses Threats to Religious Freedom

Barbara Grabner
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Bratislava, Slovakia -- "Religious Freedom: The Human Right under Attack" brought together human rights advocates from throughout Europe.

The international symposium was held on December 9, 2022, the eve of Human Rights Day.

The event was organized mainly by the Central European branch of UPF, in cooperation with four partners -- the Tunega, Púčik, and Tesár Foundation (NTPT); the Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU); Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF) Europe; and Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) -- and co-hosted by the International Center for Law and Religious Studies (ICLRS) of Brigham Young University.

The event, held in the Hotel Devín in the heart of the Slovak capital, drew an international audience of approximately 100, including **Mgr. Nicola Girasoli**, the apostolic nuncio to Slovakia, and **H.E. Nigel Baker**, the British ambassador to Slovakia. In addition, almost 100 registered guests from throughout Europe followed the program online.

The symposium opened with a classical music performance by the **Miriam Kaiser Trio** and welcoming remarks by **Miloš Klas**, the president of UPF-Slovakia.



Session 1: Promotion of Human Dignity -- Recommitment to Human Rights

The International Center for Law and Religious Studies (ICLRS) was responsible for the first session, which was moderated by **Dr. Ewelina U. Ochab**, a lawyer with the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI). Dr. Ochab, who researches genocide and its prevention as well as the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities around the globe, emphasized that human rights are not universally implemented; "rather it is an ongoing project." An open question, she said, is: How to protect the rights of everyone?



Dr. Ján Figel', a former European Commission special envoy for freedom of religion or belief outside the EU, who is currently the president of the Tunega, Púčík, and Tesár Foundation (NTPT), articulated concern about the inflationary interpretation of rights. "We cannot separate rights from duties," he said. "My freedom is limited in regard to the freedom of the other persons."

Explaining why he initiated the Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere, Dr. Figel' said: "The violation of human rights is rooted in the disrespect for human dignity. Human dignity and human rights are closely knitted together. The acknowledged first European value is human dignity. For a non-believer, religious freedom is of little interest, but dignity is acceptable to everyone and could serve as a bridge." Dr. Figel' stressed that "brotherhood" is not a sweet phrase but a commitment.

Professor Mark Hill, the vice president of the International Consortium for Law and Religion Studies (ICLARS), is a renowned advocate of religious freedom, active mainly in England and the European Parliament in Strasbourg. He praised the organizers for holding such a meaningful meeting.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has its limits, he said. "Rights only paint one side of the picture, but what are the obligations when states sign that declaration?" Consideration should be given to the fact that some believers may be offended by the right of free speech when others criticize their faith.

Professor Hill suggested that the significance of human dignity should be discussed more widely, especially in the context of court cases. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is seen in Africa and elsewhere as a European invention, he said. "Hence human dignity is more attractive for African communities as a tool that maximizes the respect for all; it is beyond political agenda, because it addresses a collective need."

Session 2: Is Religious Freedom as a Human Right Endangered in Europe?

The second session was conducted by the Central European branch of UPF and was moderated by UPF Central Europe Chair **Dr. Dieter Schmidt**. The session started with the showing of a video, produced by *The Washington Times*, about current persecution of believers, including Unificationists in Japan.

Professor Brett G. Scharffs, director of Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religion Studies, praised Dr. Ján Figel' for his farsightedness and explained why human dignity is so important: "It helps to reinvigorate and revive human rights in places which otherwise are closed. Human rights end often as a discussion over *your rights versus our rights*. Human dignity activates the better parts in the human minds. Dignity too must be enforced; it does not come automatically. But human dignity should not replace human rights." Next spring major conferences about human dignity will take

place in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, he said.

Addressing the audience remotely from the U.S..A., **Hulda Fahmi**, international director of Set My People Free, described the discriminatory apostasy and blasphemy laws for Muslims. "They cannot convert to a different religion or change some parts of their faith tradition," she said. "In some Islamic countries, if a Muslim woman marries a Christian man, it is punished. If a Muslim man converts to Christianity, his wife is forced to separate and marry another man. Especially vulnerable are former Muslims in Europe; they should be offered more space to explain their state." The right to be free to change one's faith is one of the primary goals of her organization, Set My People Free.



Dr. Afsar Rathor, a former project manager in the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and other UN organizations, recalled that in 1988 his father, who was born in Kashmir, came to Europe to visit the Auschwitz concentration camp. He said, "My son, you are so lucky that you will not see such a thing in your life!" A few years later, however, Dr. Rathor saw similar camps in Bosnia. "Why do we still discuss about human rights after several decades of establishing the Human Rights Declaration? The religions claim to make people better but often fail to do so," he said. His presentation included quotes about dignity and human rights in the Koran, the Torah and the Bible.

Dr. Roman Joch, a former advisor to the Czech prime minister and an accomplished conservative writer, spoke remotely from Prague. Dr. Joch, who is currently the director of the Slovakia-based Research Institute for Labour and Family, explained why faith benefits people: "Because it protects them from committing crimes. It provides us with the right to defend ourselves in court." He quoted Pope Gelasius I, who in the year 494 reminded the emperor of Byzantium about the difference between worldly law and the divine law to which we must submit first: "We need to be obedient to state laws, but not when they contradict the conscience. No government has a right to claim our mind."

Session 3: What Is the Role of the Media in the Promotion and Protection of Religious Freedom and Human Rights?

The Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF) conducted the third session, of which **Chantal Chételat Komagata**, the UPF coordinator for Central Europe, was the moderator.

Dr. Antonio Stango, a political scientist and the president of the Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU), said: "We are in a very difficult situation, because religious freedom is under attack. If that continues, it could dismantle the whole human rights legislation."

Dr. Stango, who has been working for human rights since the early 1980s, asked how we can awaken the media to injustice? "We can do many things," he said. "One step is to organize fact-finding tours. Encourage journalists to meet people who are persecuted! Activists need the media for raising public awareness."

Peter Zoehrer, the Europe-Middle East coordinator of UPF's International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), said: "The media should promote religious freedom but does not do so. ... In China [there are] 150 million underground Christians, outnumbering Communist Party members. Czech bishops sent out an appeal on behalf of Chinese Christians, but they found almost no media support."

He continued: "The Muslim world media do not report about the abuse and incarceration of Uighurs in China. There are almost no reports about the mass exodus of Syrian Christians. In Russia it is forbidden for churches to witness. They suffer as silenced minorities in Putin's state. All over Europe you [can find almost no] media reports about them."

Mr. Zoehrer asked, "What can be done?" and then answered, "Hold the media accountable!"



Dr. Aaron Rhodes, the president of Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF), started with an anecdote: Years ago, when he became the executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, he was asked, "Why do you do this thing?" Almost against his own intention he cried, "Because it is the Will of God." The other person was somehow shocked, not expecting such a reaction.

Over time Dr. Rhodes became indeed a treasured shield for human rights activists. Concerning the debate over "hate speech," he commented: "Freedom of expression is endangered. Presently the members of the European Union are pressured to implement laws to prohibit hate speech. That law can be misused easily for political reasons.

"First, who decides what hate speech is? Is it if the majority takes offense on certain opinions?" Simply reporting the facts would be best, Dr. Rhodes said.

Media people should learn a lesson from the Helsinki Federation, he said. "We had to keep distant from politics and present only sober facts. Today many journalists are unable to provide deeper insights, and professional ethics are almost extinct. Most of the journalists are children of the 1960s, leading crusades to bring down the established moral order."



Jacques Marion, the UPF co-chair for Europe and Middle East, offered the concluding remarks: "Even in countries where communists and humanists are not the majority, they force the state to take measures that are hardly compatible with democratic tradition." He explained the current persecution of Unification Church members in Japan, which violates many regulations of democratic societies.