

This is an abridged version of the World Evangelical Alliance's annual report to the United Nations. See also the material on the web site of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. [www.IDOP.org](http://www.IDOP.org)

WEA was granted official consultative status at the UN as an NGO (non-governmental organization) in 1997. This privilege allows WEA to issue an annual report and make a summary oral statement at the plenary meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights, which meets in Geneva, Switzerland each spring. This status in the UN gives evangelicals worldwide an important platform from which to speak out and act on behalf of those Christians who are facing religious persecution. Through the UN, the Religious Liberty Commission is able to interact directly with the decision makers from governments throughout the world, which gives the RLC the opportunity to build bridges directly with those who affect national policy decisions.

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## **THE WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE (WEA) GENEVA REPORT 2002**

### ***A PERSPECTIVE ON GLOBAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: CHALLENGES FACING THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY***

The World Evangelical Alliance is honored to take part in the work of the UN Commission on Human Rights and to greet all members of the Commission. Our organization represents more than 150 million Protestant Christians in 114 countries through their national alliances. It also maintains a wide network of about 2,000 members of parliament in 60 countries. WEA strongly supports and stresses the right of every person to hold and practice their own religious convictions - or not to have any.

We estimate that there are more than 200 million Christians in the world today who do not have full human rights as defined by the UN Declaration of Human Rights, simply because they are Christians. They are victims of **disinformation, discrimination, and persecution**. We believe that this is the largest group in the world without full human rights because of their beliefs.

We are deeply concerned with the current status of human rights on our planet, particularly the use or misuse of religion to create conflicts and even terrorist attacks.

Some even speak of World War III. The three-time Pulitzer prize winner Thomas Friedman, writing in The New York Times on 27 November, 2001, said that "World War II and the cold war were fought to defeat secular totalitarianism - Nazism and Communism - and World War III is a battle against religious totalitarianism, a view of the world that 'my faith must reign supreme and can be affirmed and held passionately only if all others are negated.' That's bin Ladenism. But unlike Nazism, religious totalitarianism can't be fought by armies alone. It has to be fought in schools, mosques, churches and synagogues, and can be defeated only with the help of imams, rabbis and priests."

How were the events of September 11th possible? What went so wrong that more than 50 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights religious fanatics could transform a jetliner into a weapon, a missile to smash buildings, killing thousands of innocent people, including women and children? What created this intolerance - and could we have done something to prevent it?

WEA believes that more attention should be paid by the UN member states to practical implementation of basic provisions of existing international norms that protect religious freedom and promote religious tolerance.

Historically, religious freedom was one of the first recognized human rights that was formally drawn up in the Code of Rhode Island of 1647 and the Westphalian Treaty of 1648. Religious liberty is integral to human nature. This right is essential to the human quest for meaning and ultimate value in life, as human beings are made in God's image and possess the fundamental right to seek him and to pursue spiritual truth. Therefore freedom of religion and thought constitute the deepest inner yearnings of humanity and as such are the absolute foundation for human rights. WEA believes that the primary function of any government is to ensure that the rights of its people can be exercised fully and freely.

We must again remind the UN member states that they have all agreed to Article 18 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads as follows: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

WEA supports the United Nations' Human Rights Committee's General Comment 22 which states that: "Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions" and that the Committee "views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community."

We also welcome the decision of the European states to include in the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Article 9: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

Another important document that regulates international relations, the Conference on Security and Co-Operation in Europe's Final Act (the Helsinki Accords) declares in Article VII: "The participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all" and "will recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience."

And it is not only in Europe that people are committed to defend religious freedom and to be tolerant toward believers who share a different faith. The American Convention on Human Rights [i.e., pan-American] in Article 12 states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and of religion. This right includes freedom to maintain or to change one's religion or beliefs, and freedom to profess or disseminate one's religion or beliefs either individually or together with others, in public or in private. No one shall be subject to restrictions that might impair his freedom to maintain or to change his religion or beliefs."

Similar is the text in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Banjul Charter) whose Article 8 states that: "Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed."

### **Word vs. Deed**

At the same time religious freedom is being violated in almost every part of the world and there is an urgent need to uphold the right to religious freedom for all people, regardless of faith, creed, language, nationality, race, color, social origin, gender, or aboriginal or other culture.

The national and local governments ought to respect the right of every person to practice, teach, propagate, change and observe his or her religion or belief. The government-sponsored gross violations of religious freedom such as genocide, murder, slavery, and torture based on religious faith or belief, as well as the destruction of holy places, should be the subject of sanctions and other exercises of foreign policy powers by nations adhering to the principles of religious freedom.

No country has the right to label traditional Christian teaching or meetings as "evil sects" or agents for "foreign" or "hostile sources" thus giving themselves some sort of "moral right" to imprison Christians and to send the pastors to prison or labor camps. Neither can the expression "disturbing social harmony" be used as a reason to deny someone's human rights if the country has signed the UN declaration. No other religious law in a country can "be of higher value" than the UN declaration. We also believe that every member in a country that has signed a UN document has the right to read and freely distribute a copy with the text of the agreement signed by the country.

Government authorities should vigorously prosecute the hate crimes rooted in religious intolerance. The misuse of psychiatry and science to restrict religious freedom should be rejected. The forcible kidnapping of members of a religious faith in order to force them to change their faith ("deprogramming") and other forms of religious vigilantism are a violation of religious freedom and should be vigorously prosecuted by government authorities. It is only the parents who have the responsibility of raising/educating their minor children in accordance with the parent's religious belief.

The sincere dialogue between religions should be promoted by governments in order to bring greater understanding and religious freedom. WEA believes that each religious faith should receive equal protection of its religious freedoms and there should be no hierarchy of religious faiths established by government policy or action on religious freedom. On the other hand, while propagating their faith, religions should act honestly and responsibly and respect the human dignity/human rights of others.

Often the discussion leads to questions about the religious freedom for the non-traditional faiths of a nation. In reality religious freedom is a concern not only for small religions but also for large religions, since all religions are inevitably in the minority in some nations. The definition of "religion" should be broadly construed and not used to limit religious freedom only to majority religious faiths in any nation. The use of the term "cult" or "sect" by government agencies has developed a pejorative connotation. The terms "religion," "minority religion," "small religion," or "new religion" should be used instead.

The most challenged and attacked point concerning the changing of one's religion as a basic right arises from the question of freedom of thought. Even at the time of the drafting of article 18 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the right to change one's religion was particularly disputed.

The opponents of this right were primarily the Islamic states, led by Saudi Arabia. The initial draft had the expression "freedom to maintain or to change his religion." It was not possible to reach agreement on this formula, and the compromise, after long discussions, was the wording "to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice". This was accepted without dissent. No reservations were amended to this part of the article.

John Locke, in his Letter Concerning Toleration (1693) said, that "No man by nature is bound unto any particular church or sect, but everyone joins himself voluntarily to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship which is truly acceptable to God. The hope of salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that communion, so it can be the only reason of his stay there."

In Western political thought and practice, the principle of religious tolerance is deeply rooted. Christianity and Judaism tackled this issue for centuries, had their Thirty and Hundred-Year Wars and learned their lesson. It appears that a similar internal struggle within Islam to re-examine its texts and accept pluralism is still ahead. In the minds of many devoted followers of Islam, religious totalitarianism is fully acceptable. From there it is not far to state practice. We must ask the question if this is compatible with the United Nations principles. How are the quoted above international norms are compatible with religious totalitarianism? We need to fight and to defeat the ideology of religious totalitarianism if we want to uphold the lofty principles of the UN Charter.

When the Taliban destroyed the Buddhist statues last year, they sent a powerful message to the world that religious totalitarianism is a denial of pluralism of faiths. Bin Laden may be an extremist but the problem is not a handful of terrorists. We are fooling ourselves if we do not see that without the acceptance of religious tolerance by all states on the planet, future September 11th attacks can be repeated. That is why we want the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations to speak forcefully on this matter and to hold responsible those who violate religious freedom.

### **The Question: Why are so many Christians Persecuted?**

It seems illogical that people who stand for sincerity, honesty, truth, honor, friendship, hard work, and compassion for the weak should be considered to pose a threat to society, or should give rise to feelings of outright hatred. Yet this is often the reason Christians are persecuted. Here are some of the common problems and misconceptions about Christian minority populations:

- \*1) The growing number of Christians is believed to threaten both the national identity and the majority religion. In many cases the two are linked.
- \*2) Christians are often outspoken for democracy and human rights.
- \*3) Christians stand up for those who are broken, weak, handicapped, and for those whose human rights are being violated. In countries where these downtrodden groups make up the majority, those who wield power become very uneasy if any of these groups is caused to stir or to react.
- \*4) Christians supposedly represent a Western influence, especially from the United States.
- \*5) Christians pose a threat to existing links between religion and the economy.
- \*6) Christians cannot be spiritually controlled by the state. They worship "another King."
- \*7) Christians have "contacts" with other Christians around the world.
- \*8) Some naive Christian organizations lack wisdom and cultural understanding, receive support from abroad, and use words like "crusade" and "claiming the territory." These create panic and fear among locals, who interpret them as military terms.
- \*9) Other religions feel directly threatened by the growing Christian church.
- \*10) A poor understanding of real Christianity (disinformation) coupled with uncertainty towards anything new.

### **What Conditions Create Persecution?**

Persecution usually passes through three phases. The first is DISINFORMATION. Disinformation begins more often than not in the media. Through printed articles, radio, television and other means, Christians are robbed of their good reputation and their right to answer the accusations made against them. Without trial, they are found guilty of all kinds of alleged crimes and misdemeanors.

The public opinion that results from the frequent repetition of such disinformation leads to the next step, which is DISCRIMINATION. Discrimination relegates Christians to a "second-class" citizenship with poorer legal, social, political and economic standing than the majority in the country.

The third stage is PERSECUTION. Once the first two conditions have been established, subtle and overt persecution can be practiced with impunity or normal protective measures taking place. Persecution can arise from the state, the police, military, extreme organizations, mobs, paramilitary groups, or religious zealots.

We believe it is vitally important to recognize this three-stage development, so that timely, firm and appropriate action can be taken the moment there is any sign of disinformation.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, WEA wants to stress again that religious freedom is the foundation and litmus test for all other human rights. Where there is no freedom of religion, other fundamental rights are always trampled upon as well. We fully agree with Norway's Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, a former advisor to WEA's Religious Liberty Commission, when he says "Religious freedom and belief is one of the fundamental human rights. Actually, it is more than that...without freedom to worship, there can be no real political freedom - no freedom of thought or freedom of conscience. These are interrelated."

For people with deeply held religious beliefs, religion is the essence of their very being. It defines the terms of their existence and determines the values they bring to bear in daily in relationships and decisions. This is why WEA believes that religious liberty is vitally important and why we wholeheartedly support the United Nations in its historical mission to protect these rights for every human being.