

## UPF and Al Liqa Center Co-Sponsor Webinar on Freedom of Thought and Belief

David Fraser-Harris  
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The Middle East - Academics and experts from diverse fields participated in a webinar titled "Freedom of Thought and Belief: Theological, Philosophical, Political and Sociological Perspectives." To see the full webinar, [click here](#).

The online conference, held on February 25, 2022, was held jointly by UPF of Europe and the Middle East and the Al Liqa' Center for Religious, Heritage, and Cultural Studies in the Holy Land.

**UNIVERSAL PEACE FEDERATION** **القائمه**  
Al-Liqa' Center for Religious, Heritage and Cultural Studies in the Holy Land  
A Virtual Conference on  
**FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND BELIEF**  
*Theological, Philosophical, Political and Sociological Perspectives*  
25 February 2022, Friday  
16:00-19:00 Jerusalem \* 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM New York  
Freedom of thought and belief are affirmed by people all across the world. However, these values are crucial for human development, but often compromised or even threatened. In this conference we will explore the foundations of freedom of thought and will attempt to identify factors that impede freedoms of thought and belief. Panelists will speak to the topic from a variety of academic perspectives.  
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After a brief introduction of the Al Liqa' Center, Bishop Emeritus Munib Younan from Palestine, the president of the Lutheran World Federation (2010-2017) and the honorary president of Religions for Peace, explained the choice of topic for this conference, which combined international participation with a solid panel of local speakers.

We are facing a "free speech recession," he said, yet Gandhi "considered free speech absolutely necessary for a human being to breathe the oxygen of liberty." Bishop Younan also stated that freedom of religion is fundamental for all other freedoms.

Dr. Yousef Zaknoun, the director of the Al-Liqa' Center and a professor of philosophy and ethics of life at Bethlehem University in Palestine, moderated the webinar.

Dr. Thomas G. Walsh, the chairman of UPF International, alluded to the unfolding crisis in

Ukraine: "We pray for peace in Ukraine, and in the Holy Land."

In his opening remarks, Dr. Walsh focused on the core freedoms of belief, thought and religion, referring to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These freedoms are increasingly threatened, he said, especially as we witness polarized times and emerging authoritarian systems. Yet, "as important as these freedoms are, they are not absolute, for they are held in check by the harm principle." All this takes our discussion beyond academic interest, he said, as it relates directly to some of the core challenges we face as humanity.

The first major session addressed the philosophical and political foundations of freedom of thought and belief. Dr. Raed Abd Al-Masih, a professor of philosophy and medical ethics at Bethlehem University, spoke on "The Impact of Philosophy and Culture on Freedom of Thought and Belief." On the role of philosophy and the importance of critical thinking, Dr. Abd Al-Masih spoke of the value of gaining a better understanding of others as we seek truth and happiness in different ways.

Listing some of the repressive societal responses to different thinkers over the ages - from silencing to prison to martyrdom - he concluded that the hallmarks of civilization include acceptance of the other, dialogue, mutual respect, and the capacity to balance one's freedom with one's responsibility.

Dr. Ján Figel' from Slovakia, a member of the Governing Board of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, spoke on "Political Systems and Freedom of Thought in the Western Context." Dr. Figel' introduced FORB (Freedom of Religion and Belief) as a term representing the three inseparable freedoms commonly referred to in major international documents: freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion, all of which are based on the fundamental principle of human rights, which is human dignity.



The three freedoms apply to the human being as a rational, moral and religious person, respectively, Dr. Figel' said. Rejecting the artificial dichotomy that he said attempts to create a separate human right for free thinkers, he stressed that all people - atheists, agnostics and believers - are entitled to the same freedom of thought. FORB is a condition of good governance and a pre-condition for sustainable development, he said (since peace requires justice, which in turn depends on human rights for all).

Turning to the global situation, Dr. Figel' said that we can see oppression is on the rise. Quoting research from the Pew Research Center, he said that 79 percent of the world's population live in countries with high or very high obstacles to freedom of religion or belief, and he listed a wide range of violations. Citing a 2019 UK government report, he said that up to 250 million Christians face persecution - "the most shocking abuse of human rights today."

Dr. Figel' went on to list ongoing abuses to the Rohingya people, the Uyghurs, the Yazidis and the Bahá'ís. Even atheism may lead to capital punishment in some countries.

Fortunately, despite such widespread repression, there is now good news for FORB. A growing number of bodies are recognizing the importance of FORB, including the European Union, the European Parliament, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, followed by appointments of representatives in a number of nations, summits involving over 100 nations and the creation of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. A series of religious initiatives for peaceful coexistence began with the Amman Message (2004), followed by "A Common Word between Us and You" (2007) and declarations in Marrakesh, Beirut, Pakistan, and most recently Abu Dhabi.

Dr. Figel' stated that equal citizenship should be promoted. "I am convinced we need FORB climate change. ... The serious situation concerns many people all over the world," he said. "The foundational principle of human rights is dignity. This is possible if we respect universal principles. I have seen resonance with the fundamental importance of dignity in Catholic, Muslim and Hebrew documents; in the EU charter and in the Indian constitution; in Pakistan and in Sudan; and in the 2018 Punta Del Este Declaration. From the ethics of equal dignity, we can move toward the political culture of equal citizenship.

"Finally, while evil spreads thanks to its influential allies - indifference, ignorance and fear - we must learn to live in diversity and to nurture allies of good - engagement, education and courage."

In the following session, two speakers addressed the relationship between nation-states and freedom of

religion and thought.

"Freedom of Thought and Belief - Political Systems in the Middle East" was the topic of Dr. Iyad Al-Barghouti, a professor of political sociology and philosophy, and president of the Arab Network for Tolerance.

The Middle East is a region where freedom of the individual has yet to be granted the same attention as justice for the group, Dr. Barghouti said. It is also important to factor in the role of colonial history in the formation of Middle Eastern states, not to mention the fundamental role of Islam as a thought system directly related to the idea of the state. This in turn placed secularism and its calls for freedom of thought in unusually sharp opposition to governments. In such patriarchal, conservative societies, religion is easily used to legitimize the regime.



During the Cold War this was often against a left-wing opposition, but with the Arab Spring there was a new, Islamist opposition. As for constitutions, most of those in the region "refer to the religious identity of the state, considering that the state religion is Islam and that the principles of Islamic Sharia are a source of legislation."

Dr. Barghouti referenced seven constitutions in the region, citing their claims to uphold freedom of religion, but added: "In fact, there are government restrictions in many countries in the region on those groups that do not believe in what the majority of the population believes in, or are outside the official doctrine followed by the state." However, these governments also have to deal with the excesses of more extreme organizations, often finding themselves accused by one side of "favoring non-Muslims" and by the other of failing to protect their own citizens. Highlighting the courage of some leaders who have spoken up in favor of freedom of belief, he concluded that "freedom of belief requires rejecting intolerance of all kinds and dealing with differences and pluralism in societies."

Next, Bishop William Al-Shomali, the general vicar and patriarchal vicar for Jerusalem and Palestine, spoke on "Freedom of Thought, Belief and Conscience in the Catholic Church." The Catholic Church, he said, defines freedom as "the ability to think, express and act according to human desire, not under external pressure." Just as an electrical tool must be used according to the maker's instructions, our freedom, which is a gift from God, must be used in accordance with God's will, he said.

"Without the light of the divine law, a person can abuse his freedom and do evil, harming himself and others," Bishop Al-Shomali said. Since we are social beings, we must recognize that our freedom has a purpose: It is "not only freedom from certain restrictions, but it is also freedom for the pursuit of truth, justice, the common good, and love." Freedom of thought is fundamental, and it is helped, not hindered, by divine revelation.

So-called "free thinkers" attempt to divorce freedom of thought from such values, Bishop Al-Shomali said; yet "the removal of God from human life has terrible moral repercussions. If God does not exist, man can reach legislation and moral choices that contradict the natural law and divine revelation."

Bishop Al-Shomali spoke of the duty of Christian theologians to reconcile reason and faith, and of the freedom to practice one's religion, stipulated in most countries yet restricted in some, either by state legislation or by the intolerant behavior of fanatical groups.



Finally, the exercise of any freedom must include the principle of responsibility toward the individual and society, and this moral principle obliges every human or social body to observe the rights of others, duties toward others, and the common good.

Other aspects were addressed by the next two speakers. Ziad El Sayegh from Lebanon, an expert on public policies and the executive director of Civic Influence Hub, spoke on "Social Media and Its Impact on Human Relations and Coexistence." Freedom of thought is an important pillar for society, he said; we each need our own space so that we can work together.



Social media are used for commercial purposes as well as to promote ideas; in either case we need to respect human dignity, Mr. El Sayegh said. Yet social media are a place of constant discussion and of differences, which appear to ignore basic democratic principles. The only thing that matters is how loud your voice is.

While some people have the impression that we are coexisting harmoniously, in reality there are two parallel realities: one a healthy democracy allowing competition and privacy, the other a constant barrage of attacks. This has a major impact on the development of society and on freedom of thought. The tendency to try to destroy those with a contrasting viewpoint turns social media into a kind of hell. Privacy should not become a pretext for aggression and conflict. Our challenge is to re-create social media as a place of common identity, with common values, social justice and responsible freedom, promoting the common good.

Dr. Omar Abed Rabo, a professor of Islamic history and archaeology, cultural heritage, and Jerusalem studies, and the head of the Humanities Department, Bethlehem University, spoke about "The Role of Universities in Educating on Freedom of Thought and Belief in Palestine." He stressed that universities should be spreading the values of human rights and of a pluralistic society.

Referring to the Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun and the role of his teachings in social life, Dr. Rabo said that such thought can be spread through cultural institutions, affecting social behavior and leading to a culture that respects human rights. Students should be guided, in all disciplines, to develop a balanced personality so that they respect the rights of others and reject exclusivism and extremism.

Dr. Rabo acknowledged that despite such teachings, all societies still witness - at one level or another - conflict based on differences of religion or thought. He recommended that all universities promote the value of dialogue and highlight the dangers of fanaticism by providing real examples, all in order to promote human dignity, tolerance and respect for others.

Following the main sessions, Bernadette Mourra of the Al Liqa' Center hosted a short discussion, in which some of the speakers responded to questions from the public. Dr. Yousef Zaknoun thanked all the speakers for their contributions, and Dr. Walsh congratulated all for a world-class discussion, expressing his hope that such collaboration will continue.