



UPF Conference on “Europe and the Future of Human Rights”

European Parliament, Strasbourg, France, December 12, 2018

By Jacques Marion

To commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), together with partnering organisations, convened on December 12, 2018, in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, two panels of eminent scholars, campaigners and practitioners to consider the theme: ‘Europe and the Future of Human Rights’.

Hosted by Hon. Patricia Lalonde, MEP, the event was attended by several members of the European Parliament and their assistants and by representatives from Strasbourg-based consulates. Czech Republic Eurodeputy Tomas Zdechovsky was one of the speakers. Cosponsors included the Academy of Geopolitics of Paris, Human Rights Without Frontiers, Women’s Federation for World Peace International and the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace.

Sadly, the day before the event, a terrorist attack on Strasbourg’s Christmas Market had shaken the whole nation, and the conference was held during the ensuing manhunt for

the terrorist. This did not prevent about 100 participants from several European countries to attend the event.

Dr Dieter Schmidt, UPF Representative for Central Europe, began the proceedings by asking for a minute of silence for those who had died or been injured in the attack. He

then invited Dr Katsumi Otsuka, president of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, to offer welcoming remarks. Dr Otsuka shared how the UPF Founders’ life of tribulation, in their war-torn homeland of Korea, shaped their life-long dedication to peace and reconciliation.





The first panel on the theme “Europe and Fundamental Freedoms” was moderated by Dr Ali Rastbeen, president of the Academy of Geopolitics of Paris. He read a message from Hon. Patricia Lalonde, unable to attend the event, who expressed her concern that the commemoration of the UDHR’s 70th anniversary should be an occasion to recall human rights violations going on around the world, notably in Yemen.

Dr Rastbeen stated that, as Europe has become a key player in the promotion of human rights internationally, we should call attention on human rights violations, in Yemen and other nations, but also expose contradictions between major powers’ stand on human rights and their international diplomacy.



As the first speaker, Dr Willy Fautré, Director and Co-founder of the Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers, spoke about the threat of Islamism, both to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to the integration of historical Islamic communities in multi-cultural Europe. He emphasised the danger of “salafization”, first to other Muslims, then to the wider society. He pointed to research showing that the image of historical Muslim communities in EU nations is being damaged and their children are being alienated from the values that their parents have held.



Hon. Tomas Zdechovsky, MEP for the Czech Republic, testified that his commitment to human rights was rooted in the experience of his family’s persecution by Nazis and under

Communism, remembering his grandfather’s words: ‘If you sleep in a democracy you will wake up in a dictatorship.’ He expressed his determination as a Eurodeputy to denounce human rights violations and defend the rights of minorities without compromise, and despite relative indifference to this issue.



Ms Diana Ahfeldt Constantinide, a Barrister specializing in human rights based in London, called the UDHR ‘humanity’s magna carta’, but noted that human rights violations have not decreased during the transition to modernity, and only changed character. From her experience working with human rights cases, she came to understand that ‘we need to be good listeners’ to gather evidence and protect people’s rights, and she concluded that ‘the cornerstone of human rights is placed in how we educate our children.’



Dr Farida Valiullina, a lawyer specializing in Public International Law and Human Rights Law based in Berlin, noted the original idealism and purpose of the UDHR but detailed the weaknesses in its legal implementation. Based on lessons learned from WWII, the system of human rights protection in Europe is the strongest in the world, she said, but citizens and legal practitioners are frequently confronted with different binding texts, pointing to the need for better cooperation between the ECHR and national legal systems.



Mr. Jacques Marion, Vice-President for UPF Europe and the Middle East,

concluded the panel with a speech on “Rights and Responsibilities”. Quoting Pope Francis’s 2014 speech on Europe at the Strasbourg Parliament, in which he spoke on the interdependence between the rights of individuals and their responsibility toward the greater good, he concluded on the need to give spiritual values their proper place in society and restore a proper balance between the “mind” and “body” of society – that is, between its spiritual dimension and its political dimension.

The second panel examined the theme ‘Philosophical Basis of Human Rights and Future Perspectives’ and was moderated by Mr. Peter Zoehrer, Executive Director of the Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF Europe).



Dr Aaron Rhodes, the former Executive Director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, author of a recent book entitled: “The Debatement of Human Rights - how Politics Sabotage the Ideal of Freedom”, emphasised the significance of the UDHR but said that the foundational principles of Articles 1&2 had been violated by the list of human rights that followed, specifically by economic and social rights. Human rights are rooted in nature, he said. Freedom and equality are not the invention of some political order, they are natural to all people. Today, however, 70 years after the Declaration, legal discrimination prevents billions of people from enjoying their freedom.



Dr Antonio Stango, president of the Italian Federation for Human Rights, praised the 1948 text of UDHR as the self-evident basis of the concept of “universalism”, justifying in some cases that other nations or international institutions intervene where a Government is not fulfilling its obligations toward its citizens. However, he said, this universalist approach is under threat from regional approaches to human rights – such as “Asian Values” or the “Cairo

Declaration” - creating a tension between the call for universalism and the defence of ‘traditional values’ leading to ‘cultural relativism’.



Dr Adrian Holderegger, Professor Emeritus at the Department of Ethics & Theology of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, spoke on the theme: “Human Rights or Citizen Rights? A New Stage in Interreligious Dialogue.” He referred to a declaration adopted in June 2018 by high ranking leaders of six major religions at the UN in Geneva, stating their commitment to recognize the concept of equality of citizen rights, which are rooted in human rights. After failing to find a common point of reference among

religions for the promotion of human rights and recognizing that the quest for a « global ethics » is at a dead-end, he said, this declaration constitutes a breakthrough by building a “dynamic triangle” between citizen rights, human rights and universal values.



As the last speaker, Mrs. Carolyn Handschin, Director of the UN Offices of the Women’s Federation for World Peace International, drew on her experience with the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to explain the background of the UDHR under the guidance of Eleanor Roosevelt, and the remarkable togetherness that the acceptance of the final draft engendered. She described the

subsequent efforts by the InterAction Council (1983-1997) to incorporate an accord on responsibilities with the involvement of dignitaries of the stature of Nelson Mandela. She emphasized the transformation that gender equality would allow in governance at all levels as well as discourse in public affairs, and she brought attention to the role of the family in nurturing an early sense of human rights and responsibilities.

In the majestic setting of the European Parliament, the conference on “Europe and the Future of Human Rights” was successfully held with a sense of solemnity fitting to the historical commemoration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The fact that it was preceded by a terrorist attack, right in the heart of Strasbourg, in the very heart of Europe, could only accentuate its relevance and the seriousness of the topics that were presented and debated.

