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August 23, 2026

MEDIA: When the Watchdog Becomes the Gatekeeper

How Media Narratives Can Defend—or Undermine—Freedom of Conscience

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AUG 23





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The fragile balance — when the scales of free expression and freedom of belief begin to crack.

How Media Narratives Can Defend—or Undermine—Freedom of Conscience

Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were written as twins. Today, both are under mounting assault—and the press is no longer always a neutral referee.

Articles 18 and 19 are not rival claims. They are two sides of the same coin. Article 18 protects freedom of thought, conscience, and religion—the right to believe, to change belief, or to hold none, and to live accordingly. Article 19 protects the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas. When one is compromised, the other withers.

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A press that systematically stigmatizes unpopular faiths or renders their persecution invisible ceases to be a watchdog and risks becoming an accomplice.

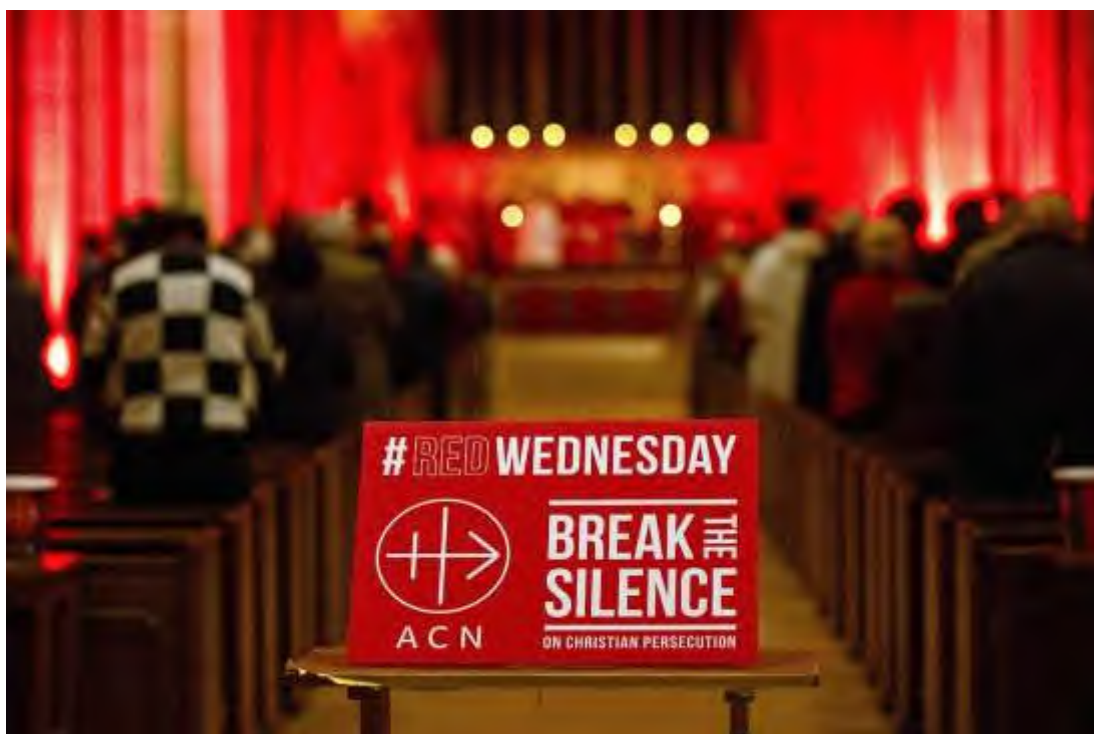
A state that treats certain convictions as suspect will eventually treat the journalists who report on them as suspect too.

This is not theory. It is the daily reality documented by those of us who have spent decades monitoring both freedoms.

The Numbers That Cut Through the Fog

Consider the numbers first, because they cut through the fog of competing narratives. **Open Doors’ World Watch List 2026 records 4,849 Christians killed for their faith in the latest reporting period—up from 4,476 the year before.** Of those deaths, **3,490 occurred in Nigeria alone. More than 388 million Christians worldwide live under high, very high, or extreme levels of persecution.** In Iran, authorities arrested 254 Christians in 2025—nearly double the previous year—imposing combined prison sentences exceeding 280 years, often under an amended article criminalizing “**propaganda contrary to the holy religion of Islam.**” Churches that had stood for a century and a half were shuttered or demolished. Converts were portrayed in state media as traitors and Zionist agents.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s 2026 Annual Report recommended 18 countries for “Country of Particular Concern” designation and 11 for the Special Watch List. In Nigeria, targeted religious violence has claimed an estimated 53,000 civilian lives since 2009, including some 21,000 in the last five years. School abductions, church bombings, and village massacres continue with grim regularity. Yet how often do these figures lead the evening news in European capitals? How often are they given the same sustained, humanizing coverage as other atrocities that fit more convenient storylines?



Breaking the silence: 4,849 Christians killed for their faith — yet how often do these numbers lead the news? The image shows a church interior lit in red during a Red Wednesday event, with the official ACN sign “#RED WEDNESDAY – BREAK THE SILENCE ON CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION” (OSV News photo/courtesy ACN)

Democracy’s Filter: Who Counts as a Victim?

The press is democracy’s filter. When it selects which suffering counts, it also determines which suffering becomes visible.

If the world does not know a massacre is happening, then in the public consciousness it might as well never have happened.

The same filter operates in subtler ways inside liberal democracies. In **Spain**, the government has revived a proposal to repeal **Article 525 of the Criminal Code**, the offense of wounding religious feelings. **Catholic, evangelical, Jewish, and Muslim representatives have opposed the move**, warning that insults and attacks against religious communities are already rising. The official justification is that “ideas or beliefs are not holders of fundamental rights.” **This sounds enlightened until one notices the double standard: other identities receive robust protection against “hate,” while religious conviction is increasingly recast as fair game.**

Meanwhile, Spanish television recently framed the rapid opening of evangelical churches as an “invasion,” complete with sensational headlines about payment apps and growth rates, offering little context about the communities themselves.

Soft Authoritarianism in the West

In the **United Kingdom**, army veteran and physiotherapist **Adam Smith-Connor** was convicted for three minutes of silent prayer on a public street near an abortion facility. He stood with his back to the building, praying for the son he lost to abortion more than two decades earlier. The court treated a slightly bowed head and clasped hands as evidence of “disapproval.” He was given a conditional discharge and ordered to pay £9,000 in costs.

It was the first modern British conviction for a thought.

Freedom of thought, unlike speech, admits no restriction under international law. When a state begins prosecuting the content of a man’s silent prayer, the boundary between public order and inner life has already begun to collapse.

These Western cases are not equivalent to Iran’s prisons or Nigeria’s mass graves. But they reveal the same logic in embryonic form: certain beliefs may be held privately, provided they do not become visible, audible, or politically inconvenient. Stigmatizing language does the preparatory work.

The words “sect” and “cult” increasingly function as slurs. They dehumanize an entire community in advance, making subsequent restrictions easier to justify.

Austria, a nation of nine million, maintains dozens of publicly funded or semi-official “anti-sect” offices—an unmatched density in Europe. Taxpayer money has flowed for years into agencies whose primary output is too often recycled media clichés rather than rigorous evidence. Once the label sticks, families can lose children in custody disputes, churches can lose recognition, and journalists who question the prevailing narrative can themselves be painted as apologists.

The Industrialization of Narrative Warfare

The war of narratives is now industrialized. Artificial intelligence can produce deepfakes of pastors and imams in hours. Coordinated networks flood platforms with fabricated atrocity footage. States and ideologues increasingly treat perception as territory.

When legacy media amplify unverified claims that serve a preferred side while burying inconvenient data, they cease to referee and begin to play.

The result is not merely bias. It is the erosion of a shared factual world in which people of radically different convictions can still argue as equals.

Religious Liberty Is Indivisible

Religious liberty is indivisible. An attack on the freedom of one community ultimately threatens the freedom of all.

The test of religious liberty is not whether we defend beliefs we admire. It is whether we defend the freedom of those whose beliefs we may profoundly reject.

The same principle that condemns China’s **“Sinicization”** of every faith, Iran’s targeting of converts, and Nigeria’s unchecked militia violence must also defend the right of a Muslim reformer, a Christian convert, an atheist, or a Jehovah’s Witness to live and speak without fear. Islamism as a political project—seeking to organize law and public space according to one reading of religious sources, with scant room for apostasy or equal citizenship—must be examined on its texts and effects, not dismissed as “phobia.” Equally, the secular temptation to treat all robust religious conviction as a threat to “progress” must be resisted. Both errors replace evidence with narrative.

The Choice Before the Press

A free press that takes religious liberty seriously would report the 4,849 deaths, the 254 Iranian arrests, the silent-prayer conviction, and the Spanish repeal debate with equal seriousness. It would distinguish theology from politics, victims from perpetrators, and criticism from incitement. It would refuse the cheap thrill of the “sect” label.

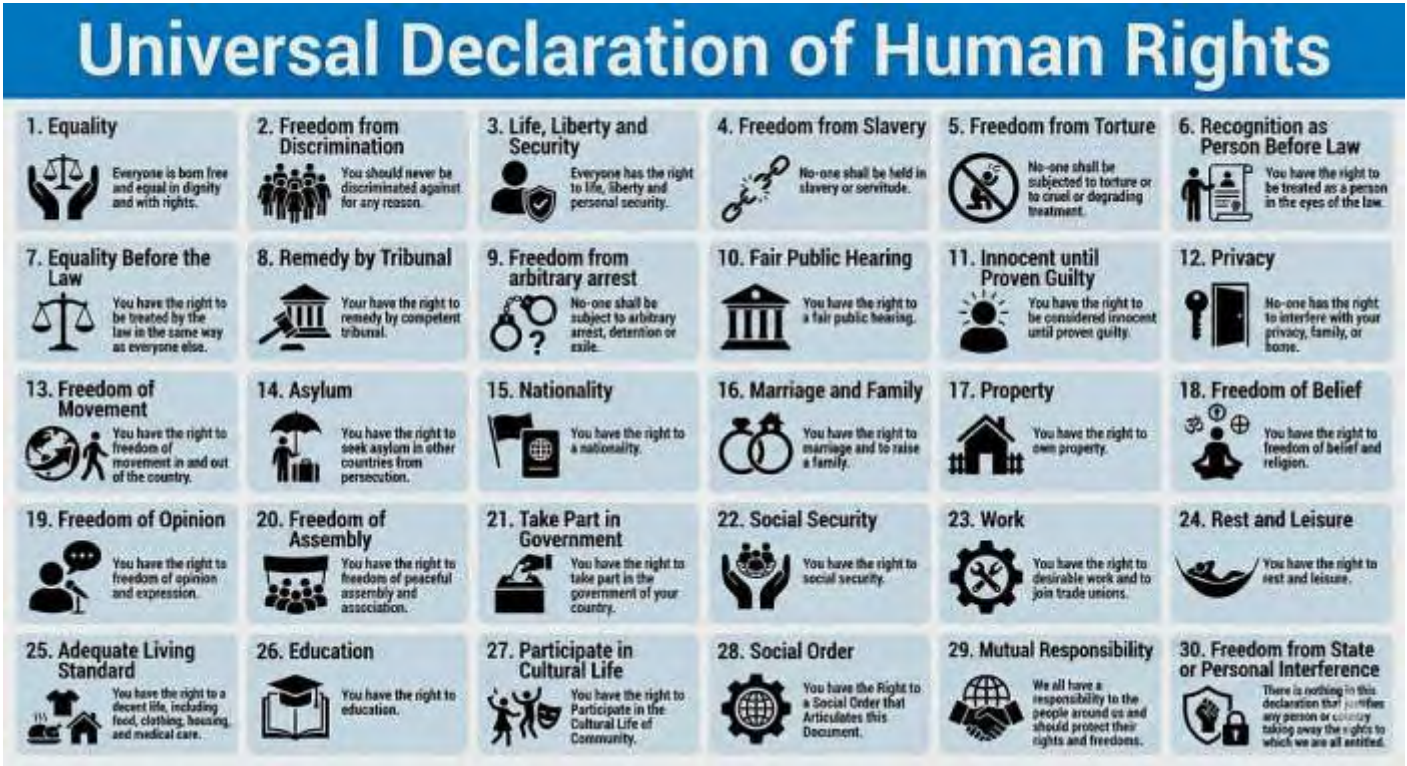
Journalists and faith communities need each other. The former need the latter’s stubborn insistence that truth is not manufactured by power. The latter need the former’s courage to make hidden suffering visible.

The question on **World Press Freedom Day**—and every day—is simple:

Will the press stand with the voiceless, or with the mob?

Will it defend Articles 18 and 19 together, or betray both in pursuit of sensationalism and scapegoats? In this fragile moment, integrity is not a luxury.

Integrity is not a luxury. It is the last remaining condition for a public square in which conscience and information can still breathe.



Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — twin freedoms that stand or fall together.

#ReligiousFreedom #FoRB #PressFreedom #Article18 #Article19 #FreeSpeech #HumanRights
#WorldPressFreedomDay #NarrativeWarfare #Persecution

RELEVANT LINKS:
Key sources cited in the essay

- **Open Doors World Watch List 2026:** www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/
- **USCIRF 2026 Annual Report:** www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscifr-releases-2026-annual-report-exposes-egregious-religious
- **Full USCIRF reports page:** www.uscifr.gov/publications/uscifr-annual-report
- **RSF World Press Freedom Index 2026:** rsf.org/en/index

Specific cases & background

- **Adam Smith-Connor silent prayer case (ADF):** adflegal.org/article/uk-army-vet-appeals-conviction-for-praying-silently-near-abortion-facility/
- **ADF International coverage:** adfinternational.org/news/army-veteran-confirms-appeal-as-crown-prosecution-service-concede-silent-prayer-not-necessarily-an-offence/

Foundational documents

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 18 & 19):** www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
- **ICCPR Article 19 & Human Rights Committee General Comment 34:** www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-34-article-19-freedom-opinion-and

Organisations for further reading

- **FOREF Europe (Forum for Religious Freedom Europe):** foref-europe.org/
- **FOREF Deutschland:** www.foref.info/
- **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF):** hrwf.eu/
- **Bitter Winter (magazine on religious liberty and human rights):** bitterwinter.org/
- **Reporters Without Borders (RSF):** rsf.org/en

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