

UPF Denmark Conference Exposes Threats to Religious Freedom

Jonathan Selvig Skjalholt
December 10, 2025
Soteria International



Copenhagen, Denmark – Human rights activists and civil society representatives gathered to mark Human Rights Day on December 10, 2025, at the annual Spiritual Human Rights Conference, in Copenhagen and online. Soteria International, together with Human Rights Without Frontiers, the Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion and Belief, the European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion, and the Universal Peace Federation, co-hosted the event.



Moderated by **Mr. Jonathan Selvig Skjalholt** of Soteria International, the conference highlighted pressing challenges to freedom of religion or belief in Europe and beyond. Across different national, religious, and ideological contexts, speakers observed a growing inconsistency between formal human rights commitments and their application by states, institutions, media, and authorities.

Mr. Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, emphasized the protection afforded by Article 18 of the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), stressing that freedom of religion or belief includes spiritual philosophies such as yoga traditions. He explained how yoga practitioners have been arrested, stigmatized, or lost their employment after media portrayals framing them as "dangerous," despite the absence of legal findings. He said that the presumption of innocence, a core principle of the rule of law, is being repeatedly violated in the case of religious minorities. Administrative measures, reputational damage, and social exclusion have devastating effects on spiritual practitioners, even when no crime has been legally identified.

Mr. Bashy Quraishy, secretary general of the European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion, addressed the human rights situation of Muslim communities in Denmark and the European Union. He said that Muslims, despite being the second largest religious group, face systematic marginalization in a society that calls itself secular and democratic. Official denial of racism coexists with policies targeting Muslim populations, such as labelling neighborhoods as "ghettos" and dismantling them under social engineering policies. Discriminatory practices extend to family reunification and visa procedures. These examples show how secularism can transform neutrality into exclusion.



Mr. Gregory Christensen, leader of Youths for Human Rights, highlighted that human rights are co-dependent; freedom of religion, expression, and thought cannot exist in isolation. Lack of public education about human rights correlates with abuse and social exclusion, which starts with bullying at schools. Teaching children about rights and responsibilities is essential, he said. He underlined that freedom of speech is meaningless without freedom of thought, and that societies often marginalize those who challenge dominant conventions.

Mr. Nobuhiro Igarashi, chairman of UPF-Denmark, drew attention to serious violations of religious freedom in South Korea, including harsh arrests such as that of Dr. Hak Ja Han. He emphasized that South Korea and Japan are pivotal contexts in which international human rights scrutiny is urgently needed and that political interference often leads to violations of freedom of religion and belief. Mr. Igarashi stressed that when the judiciary is used as a political tool to silence believers, democracy loses its foundation, and when religious freedom disappears, those in power can suppress others and impose specific beliefs. He warned that failure to address religious repression in one region risks normalizing and exporting such practices globally.



Mr. Hans Noot, director of the Gerard Noodt Foundation, described a broad European shift toward religious deconfiguration; while societies increasingly speak the language of inclusion, religious expression, especially within minority religions, is becoming unwelcome. "Neutrality" is redefined not as tolerance of beliefs, but as their absence from public space. Minority religions face growing administrative obstacles rather than overt persecution. This signals a transformation of freedom-of-belief restrictions from legal prohibitions to bureaucratic suppression.

Ms. Eva Miskelova, from the Path of YahRa spiritual society, described violence against religious believers in Central Europe. She said that in Czechia, influenced by post-communist secularism, the children of religious families face bullying, and anti-cult ideology represents a significant threat to pluralism. Violent acts such as attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany demonstrate that stigmatization can have deadly consequences. Ms. Miskelova described anti-cult rhetoric as a form of intolerance, legitimizing surveillance and repression, while sensational media headlines stigmatize spiritual minorities for clicks.

Mr. Arthur Lederer, vice-chairman of Natha Yoga Center Denmark, outlined abuse and harassment against the Danish yoga school, Natha Yoga Center, and its students. He described police raids during classes, the examination of private notebooks, and invasive [investigations](#). Media narratives labelling the yoga school as a "dangerous cult" result in prejudgment, whereby attempts to demonstrate innocence are viewed as proof of guilt. Mr. Lederer's testimony illustrates how media interference can override judicial safeguards.



Ms. Camelia Marin of Soteria International concluded the event by questioning whether European institutions genuinely protect human rights. She said that human rights originate from shared moral principles across cultures, not from ideological dogma. Even highly ranked democracies, such as Denmark, display serious flaws in implementation. Ms. Marin shared a brief analysis of the compatibility of EU law with the European Court of Human Rights, highlighting complex issues and raising concerns about how respect for fundamental human rights and international judicial collaboration, including the rule of law, will be applied in the European context.



The conference identified a pattern of systematic erosion of freedom of religion or belief, affecting various religious groups, not always through explicit legal bans, but through presumption of guilt, anti-cult narratives, media-driven stigmatization, administrative harassment, and redefined secular neutrality. It held that the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief promised in Article 18 of the ICCPR is of paramount importance in ensuring the growth and evolution of individuals and of societies, and must be held in the highest regard.

Speakers collectively warned that human rights protections are only as strong as their application. The conference called for renewed vigilance, education, and accountability in institutions and the media, and a recommitment to the foundational principle that belief, conscience, and spirituality must never be treated as a crime.