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2026 brought no improvement for persecuted Christians or for religious freedom

The editors on the yearbooks Religious Freedom 2026 and on Persecution and Discrimination against Christians 2026 draw a bleak conclusion

(Bonn/Berlin, 03.11.2026) The annual yearbooks on the state of religious freedom and the persecution and discrimination of Christians worldwide have just been presented at a press conference in Berlin. Unfortunately, when asked whether the situation regarding violations of religious freedom and human rights in general had improved, and whether discrimination against and persecution of people of faith had decreased, the editors of the yearbooks had to answer with a clear 'no'.

The global situation regarding religious freedom in 2026 must be assessed as 'worse' to 'persistently bad' compared with previous years. Particular attention was drawn to the worsening situation in Iran, Pakistan and Egypt, as well as in countries such as China and Cuba. Populist exploitation of religious identity or narratives aimed at restricting freedom of religion and belief is on the rise. The misuse of faith as an ideological weapon and Russia's legitimisation of war crimes are also increasingly prominent issues.



The speakers at the press conference on site (from left): Kenan Araz (Chairman of the Central Council of Oriental Christians in Germany), Dr Johann Matthies (Representative of the Evangelical Alliance in Germany), Thomas Rachel MP (Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion and Belief), Prof. Dr Thomas Paul Schirrmacher (President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom and the International Society for Human Rights), Matthias Böhning (Secretary-General of the International Society for Human Rights) © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

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It is not only religious freedom that is under threat, but increasingly also the will to defend it

The President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) and the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), Prof. Dr Thomas Paul Schirrmacher, outlined the current situation:

“Religious freedom faces a twofold threat worldwide: from those who trample it underfoot, and from those who seek to marginalise it in international politics. The horrifying reports of religious persecution show no sign of abating. Even experts are struggling to keep track of the situation. In Africa, for example, the killings of Christians, moderate Muslims and adherents of traditional religions by Islamist extremists are spreading geographically ever further.



Prof. Dr Thomas Paul Schirrmacher (President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom and the International Society for Human Rights) during his speech © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

But alongside this persecution, a second, dangerous trend is emerging: it is not only religious freedom that is coming under pressure, but also the political will to defend it. In the face of wars and civil wars in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Iran, the Middle East and elsewhere, and in the face of geopolitical power struggles and energy dependencies, religious freedom is increasingly being sidelined. For governments that oppress religious minorities, this is good news: they are increasingly unlikely to face serious consequences.

The only way to counter this is through a broad, interfaith alliance of politicians, parliamentarians, journalists, academics, religious leaders and human rights organisations. Such an alliance requires a common foundation: independently gathered, carefully verified and reliable facts. With our yearbooks, we aim to make a concrete contribution to this cause. For those who marginalise religious freedom in international politics create new scope for the persecutors.”

Russia is using religion as a weapon against Ukraine

Dr Johann Matthies, the political representative of the Evangelical Alliance in Germany, stated that religious freedom requires clarity and advocacy. Restrictions on religious freedom, he said, are a harbinger of restrictions on other freedoms. Matthies went on to say:

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“Ukraine shows just how much faith can come under attack. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more than 640 places of worship have been damaged or destroyed in the course of Russia’s war of aggression. Official Ukrainian estimates put the number of clergy from various denominations killed by Russian forces at least 67 by spring 2025. In the occupied territories, congregations are being dispossessed. Church services are being disrupted by raids. Clergy are being interrogated and sentenced to long prison terms. I have met pastors who have lost their churches and now live as displaced persons in their own country.

It is particularly disturbing that religion itself is being turned into a weapon here. The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church interprets the war of aggression as a ‘metaphysical struggle’ and equates death on the front line with the sacrifice of Christ. At the same time, Russia is portraying itself in the West as a defender of Christianity. We must call out this false narrative for what it is. As the Evangelical Alliance, we adopted a position paper in September. It states: ‘Our Christian faith does not seek political dominance; therefore, we reject any attempt to misuse religion for political ends.’ This applies first and foremost to ourselves, but certainly also to Moscow. When the Russian Orthodox Church is misused to further state objectives at home and abroad, it ceases to be the church of the faithful and becomes an instrument of those in power.


During the question-and-answer session with guests and journalists © IIRF/ Martin Warnecke

What does this mean for Christians in Germany? Firstly, clarity: freedom of religion is a human right. Where it is violated, we speak out against it. Secondly, loyalty: we stand alongside those who suffer because of their faith, through prayer, practical help and political advocacy. Thirdly, presence: we do not want to make ourselves heard only when we are outraged. We seek dialogue with politicians across party lines before a conflict arises. The Church in Ukraine shows that faith cannot be eradicated. Parish halls have become places of refuge and aid centres, and displaced congregations have re-established themselves elsewhere. This Church serves the people, not those in power. We should model ourselves on this.”

Turning our attention to invisible forms of violence

Dr Gudrun Kugler, Member of the National Council, Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the ÖVP’s spokesperson on human rights, drew attention to the specific forms of persecution to which women are subjected:

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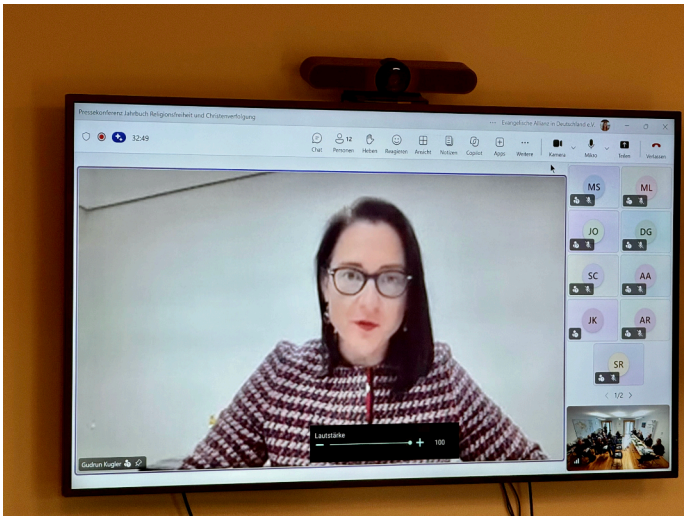
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“Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right – and yet it is being disregarded worldwide to such an extent that decisive action is required. People of all faiths are discriminated against, threatened, persecuted or even killed because of their religious beliefs. This reality is not a marginal phenomenon; it affects millions of people in every region of the world. The fact is that Christians are among the groups most frequently affected – a finding confirmed by both church organisations and independent observers, yet one that remains widely underestimated in the public consciousness.



Dr Gudrun Kugler (Member of the National Council, Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Spokesperson for Human Rights for the ÖVP) during her online statement © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

It is all the more important to consider the various dimensions of persecution in a nuanced way. This also includes the gender-specific dimension. Women from religious minorities often experience persecution in a dual or multiple capacity – both as women and on account of their faith. Whilst men are more frequently subjected to direct physical violence, women are particularly affected by forced marriage, abductions, sexualised violence and social exclusion. These forms of violence often remain invisible, yet have a profound impact on the lives of those affected and on the stability of entire communities.”

Discrimination and persecution in Egypt and Cuba receive little attention

Martin Lessenthin, a human rights expert and co-editor of the yearbooks, drew particular attention to the situation in Cuba and Egypt in a written statement:

“The global situation regarding religious freedom is steadily deteriorating. Wars and political tensions have created a situation in which oppression, discrimination and persecution can be more easily concealed by the perpetrators and more easily ignored by decision-makers in democratic states. This disregard has reached its highest possible level. As examples, I would like to mention two states that are not in the media spotlight: Egypt and Cuba. The violations of religious freedom suffered by Copts in Egypt, coupled with police arbitrariness and the failure of the rule of law, are merely ‘noted’; meanwhile, generous economic cooperation with the Egyptian state, which treats Copts as second-class citizens, continues without question. Egypt is regarded as an allied state that is needed as a partner for stability. Knowing this, the Egyptian government does not need

Text & Technology:
Titus Vogt (ViSdP)
Vorderer Kamp 52a, D-25479 Ellerau
Phone: +49 4106 804806
Fax: +49 4106 804807
Email: Titus.Vogt@bucer.de

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to change anything; its professed commitment to religious freedom and human rights is nothing but smoke and mirrors. This can only change if there is public reporting on prisoners of conscience such as the Christian activist Patrik Georg Zaki, the convert Said Abdelrazek – who has been imprisoned since his conversion to Christianity in July 2025 – or the Christian academic Augustin, who was sentenced in January 2026 to five years' imprisonment for 'contempt of religions'."



During the question-and-answer session with guests and journalists © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

Commenting on the situation in Cuba, Lessenthin explained: "The persecution and imprisonment of pastors such as Maikel Pupo Velazquez and other Christians critical of the regime in Cuba are barely noticed in Europe. The Cuban state already treats the mere invitation to a joint public prayer in a sports stadium as a 'crime'. Nor is state-sponsored repression against Christian-motivated opposition figures such as Pastor Alexis Padron Lorenzo, the Ladies in White – who are repeatedly prevented from attending church services – or the doctor Dr Oscar Biscet a topic of discussion for politicians, the media or church representatives in Europe, and is therefore known only to an informed minority. The Violent Incident Database (VID) records 337 incidents in Cuba for 2025, primarily due to recurring short-term detentions and administrative coercion."

The yearbooks are now available to download free of charge (https://iirf.global/jahrbuch/) or can be purchased from bookshops as a bound, flip-through yearbook for 16 euros. Charitable organisations can order free copies in packs of 10 from the International Institute for Religious Freedom for targeted distribution to decision-makers (jahrbuch@vkw.li, Fax: 0228/9650389).

Bibliographic information

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