April 2024

Report on Recent IIRF Africa (Cape Town) Activities

Africa affiliate of International Institute for Religious Freedom relaunched at the *Conference on Religious Freedom in South Africa*

ABOUT THE IIRF

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a "meeting place" for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.

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Abstract

The International Institute for Religious Freedom Africa (Cape Town) was founded in 2007, simultaneously with the international structure of IIRF, then based in Bonn, Cape Town and Colombo. The IIRF Africa (Cape Town), a strategic regional affiliate of the IIRF, is reactivating its dormant structure and activities, under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer. This resurgence reflects a shared aspiration among South African scholars in the field of law and religion to establish a platform for collaborative research and advocacy concerning the safeguarding of religious freedom within South Africa and beyond.

About the IIRF Africa (Cape Town)

The International Institute for Religious Freedom Africa (Cape Town), in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg, Rhodes University, and the University of the Free State, co-hosted a multidisciplinary international conference on religious freedom. The *Conference on Religious Freedom in South Africa*, themed "Freedom of Religion or Belief in a Democracy," was held on 11–12 April 2024 in Johannesburg, South Africa. This inaugural conference marks the commencement of a proposed bi-annual series of South African based conferences with evolving themes. It surpassed expectations in terms of both response and interest, highlighting a palpable demand for these vital discussions within the academic and societal realms.

The Conference celebrated the reactivation of the dormant structure of IIRF Africa (Cape Town), a strategic regional affiliate of the IIRF, under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer. This resurgence reflects a shared aspiration among South African scholars in the field of law and religion to establish a platform for collaborative research and advocacy concerning the safeguarding of religious freedom within South Africa and beyond. IIRF Africa aims to serve as a multidisciplinary network, uniting academics, researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and scholars of religion actively involved in addressing religious freedom issues. IIRF Africa is dedicated to advancing meaningful initiatives to promote religious freedom, encompassing academic research and publications, the creation of teaching and training opportunities, and addressing current issues in this field. These efforts aim to inform legal advocacy and shape public policy in support of religious freedom. The conference, along with other related endeavors, exemplify these goals.

Participation

The conference drew significant attention, with up to 40 attendees at some stages. Out of the attendees, 9 were international guests, from as far as the United States, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East, with 5 of them delivering insightful presentations. The conference featured 20 plenary interdisciplinary papers, covering a spectrum of perspectives including legal and human rights,

politics and public policy, sociological, and theological viewpoints. A formidable group of internationally renowned scholars attended, alongside arguably the most prominent scholars in South Africa within the field of law and religion. This brought significant prestige to the event and is expected to generate interest in future conferences. Legal practitioners from reputable international and local legal advocacy organizations further enriched the discourse with diverse perspectives. The presentations, encompassing both academic and pragmatic approaches, addressed contemporary issues surrounding the interaction of religion or belief in society, fostering engaging discussions and debates. The selected paper presentations represented a diverse demographic with varied religious or belief convictions, spanning from secular and atheistic perspectives to traditional religious views. This diversity not only offered distinct perspectives on contemporary issues regarding religion's role in society but also stimulated rich and engaging discussions and debates. Prof Iain Benson from the University of Notre Dame, Australia, and Emeritus Prof Rassie Malherbe from UJ, distinguished scholars in the intersection of law and religion, delivered keynote addresses that set the tone for the conference. The Deputy Director of IIRF, Dr. Kyle Wisdom from the United States, also was among the presenters.

Their remarks were underscored by the guiding principles of religious freedom for the conference. Firstly, it was noted that the shorthand terms 'religion' or 'religious freedom' in the South African Constitution (section 15) extends to notions of conscience, thought, belief, and opinion, encompassing a broad array of secular and sectarian worldviews. Second, religious freedom, in all its variations, is a precious asset for everyone, despite existential differences. Therefore, an equality-based approach, as outlined in Section 9 of the Constitution, promotes religious pluralism and respectful coexistence among believers. Finally, while religion or belief is always deeply personal, it should never be private. Therefore, principled public discourse should inclusively embrace all deeply held views and expressions, even if those views are opposing, provoking, irrational, or incapable of scientific proof. This requires a balanced approach between the freedom to declare beliefs openly and without fear of hindrance or reprisal and the absence of coercion or constraint.

Publication

In light of the IIRF's previous wholehearted endorsement of support and the suggestion to organize a special issue of the International Journal for Religious Freedom (IJRF) focusing on religious freedom in Africa and incorporating selected post-conference papers, we are eager to pursue this recommendation. This will further extend the reach and impact of the conference and the reactivation of the IIRF Africa. Professors Shaun de Freitas and Helena Van Coller, both esteemed members of the academic board of IIRF, have tentatively agreed to serve as guest editors for a thematic volume of the IJRF, with the permission from and under the supervision of the managing editor, Prof Janet Epp Buckingham. If this arrangement remains viable, we suggest promptly com-

municating the journal's guidelines for authors along with the anticipated submission date for paper proposals.

Master's Degree Project

Additionally, we are excited to report that discussions among representatives from various South African universities, legal advocacy organizations, and international experts have sparked an initiative to draft a concept proposal for an intervarsity master's degree program in South Africa focused on the intersection of religion and society. This proposed multidisciplinary program will take a hybrid approach, integrating theoretical and practical components into the curriculum and accommodate students from diverse fields of study, including law, politics, religion studies, journalism, sociology, philosophy, and more. Students will have the flexibility to choose a supervisor from a diverse pool of academics across disciplines and institutions for their minor dissertation, tailored to their specific area of interest. Degrees will be conferred by the institution where students register for their minor dissertation. While this initiative presents challenges, it was evident from the conference discussions that such an educational curriculum, currently absent from academic discourse in South Africa, is urgently needed to encourage and uphold religious freedom across all sectors of society.

Next Steps

The IIRF international celebrates this productive conference and emerging initiative of IIRF Africa. As Africa is incredibly diverse in its religious, demographic and legal complexity it is important to have specialists working in the region. The IIRF is especially interested in the academic initiative of IIRF Africa and is excited about the pioneering work to advance religious freedom in university curricula.