



Reports

Thomas Schirrmacher

The Protestant Faith and Shared Civilizational Values

Presented to the G20 Religion Forum (R20)
Bali, Indonesia, 2–3 November 2022

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Paul Schirrmacher, PhD, DD, (born 1960) is President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights and President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo, Brasilia). He teaches as extraordinary professor of the sociology of religion at the state University of the West in Timisoara (Romania) and human rights and religious freedom at Oxford University (Regent’s Park College). In his religious role he is Bishop and Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), which represents churches with 600 million Protestant Christians.

Schirrmacher earned three doctorates in ecumenical theology (Kampen, Netherlands), in cultural anthropology (Los Angeles), and in the political science and sociology of religions (Bonn, Germany) and received several honorary doctorates and honours from the USA and India. He has given guest lectures in more than 100 countries. He has authored and edited 102 books, which have been translated into 18 languages. His newest books include ‘Coffee Break with the Pope’ (2016), ‘Corruption’ (2016), ‘Human Rights’ (2014), ‘Human trafficking’ (2013), ‘Fundamentalism: When Religion turns violent’ (2013), and ‘Racism’ (2008).

Schirrmacher regularly testifies in Parliament, in High Courts and at the United Nations and OSCE, e. g. in the German parliament (Deutscher Bundestag), the House of Lords, the EU Parliament, the US Houses of Representatives or the Supreme Court of Brazil. He is known for his role in the first ever joint statement by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and World Evangelical Alliance on mission and human rights, published mid 2011. The German major newspaper ‘Die Welt’ calls him one of the three leading experts on religious freedom globally and “Pope Francis’ most loved Protestant”.

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The Most Reverend Dr. Thomas Paul Schirrmacher is an Anglican archbishop, Christian moral philosopher, and specialist in the sociology of religion and religious freedom. He has authored and edited 102 books, which have been translated into 18 languages. Dr. Schirrmacher is Secretary General & CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance.

It is a great privilege to bring warm greetings from the World Evangelical Alliance and the 600 million Christians in 143 nations whom we represent and connect! May God bless you and give you the wisdom needed for your responsibilities. Our team from the WEA met in Jakarta with a team from the Nahdlatul Ulama already three years ago to plan joint efforts to promote civilizational values, as Christians and Muslims working together. We are people of good will, who do not want to use violence against each other, but who instead want to engage in rational discourse with each other, and promote a free and just society in which we all can live.

I grew up in Germany at a time when our country was addressing problems and questions that now face our global society. We were not only dealing with our responsibility for the Nazi regime that had perpetrated the Holocaust and destroyed tens of millions of ordinary people. We were also painfully aware that in less than forty years our people had tried and were trying several radically different ways of organizing society, at least three of which had strong ideological foundations underlying them. And all three of these ideological ways of organizing society led to disaster.

We had been, until 1918, the German Empire, led by an extremely powerful Kaiser, and our empire used religion to get power inside the minds of people. During World War I our imperial soldiers wore belt buckles with “God with us” printed on them, and many soldiers honestly believed it. This organization of society, combining an empire with religious ideology, contributed to millions of deaths. The destruction was so extensive that some of those battlefields of a century ago are still off limits to anyone but scientists.

The ideology of National Socialism replaced the ideology of a German Christian Empire, but it was also a *religious* ideology. It was filled with religious symbols and rituals, while the party became a type of religious community. Some branches of the movement used Christian terminology to support Hitler. I wrote a Ph.D. dissertation titled *Hitler’s War Religion*. A dysfunctional religion became an imperial ideology. This memory should haunt us forever.

While we West Germans were dealing with our responsibility for two ideological empires, our East German cousins were under Communism. The Communists primarily had Christianity and Judaism in mind when they called religion “the opiate of the people.” Communism was so anti-religious that it became a religion. Its ideology reminded many of us of Christian theology, but with several themes turned upside down. The persecution of normal religious communities illustrated for us its rejection of normal humanity. Many people, including some of my current friends, fled from East Germany to West Germany, but few went in the opposite direction.

Our West German constitution and system of organizing society were designed to prevent such horrors in the future. But in an open, free society, it is not possible for state officials to proclaim what the people will believe and what values they will follow. That approach had failed; people will always develop their own convictions. But without an official ideology, how can a government claim to be legitimate?

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One of our high court judges, Justice Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, summarized the issue well in what is known as “Böckenförde’s dilemma.” He declared, “The liberal, secular state lives on the basis of presuppositions which it cannot itself guarantee.”¹ What he meant is that a state can proclaim and enforce a law that says murder is wrong, but the non-ideological state has no morally binding basis for explaining why such a law is right. Many states murder people they do not like and exterminate groups of people seen as sub-human. A secular democracy has no obvious answer to that problem. Why should the state prohibit murder? Or, why should the state not protect all forms of life, such as harmful bacteria and the Covid-19 virus?

In answer to this global issue, I will not offer an ideology to compete with National Socialism or Communism. You know that as Evangelicals, we always proclaim the “Evangel,” our faith that in Christ, God is reconciling people to himself. We invite others to join in trusting this promise, but this is not a national ideology. We have great role models in our Protestant history that address these global issues, yet in a way that always invites people of other faiths, or of no defined faith, to join our humanitarian efforts. I have three examples.

At the inaugural conference of the WEA, in London in 1846, with over 800 delegates representing 52 Protestant denominations from the UK, Europe, the US, and Canada, one of our first hot topics was how to stop the horrendous

¹ His longer statement in German says, „Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann. Das ist das große Wagnis, das er, um der Freiheit willen, eingegangen ist. Als freiheitlicher Staat kann er einerseits nur bestehen, wenn sich die Freiheit, die er seinen Bürgern gewährt, von innen her, aus der moralischen Substanz des einzelnen und der Homogenität der Gesellschaft, reguliert. Andererseits kann er diese inneren Regulierungskräfte nicht von sich aus, das heißt mit den Mitteln des Rechtszwanges und autoritativen Gebots zu garantieren suchen, ohne seine Freiheitlichkeit aufzugeben und – auf säkularisierter Ebene – in jenen Totalitätsanspruch zurückzufallen, aus dem er in den konfessionellen Bürgerkriegen herausgeführt hat.“ *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 60. First given as a lecture in 1964, his published essay became a constant theme in serious discussions of religion and politics well into our century.

evil of slavery. Many of our first leaders were also leaders in the anti-slavery movement; some were colleagues of William Wilberforce, the British member of Parliament who had led the abolitionist efforts. Perhaps the most surprising speaker at that event was Rev. Mollison Maddison Clark, black pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, a church that was mostly made up of slaves. That's right — a black pastor from a church of slaves was a keynote speaker at a mostly white conference of Christian leaders in London in 1846. I see this as a precedent that invites imitation.

One of the WEA's first actions, in 1847, was to publish a 400-page volume about what we do; it included a section on international religious freedom. During the next century, the WEA sent delegations to dozens of countries on several continents to meet with heads of state and senior government officials, appealing for religious freedom for their inhabitants. The WEA advocated not only for Protestants, but also on behalf of other branches of Christianity, such as the Orthodox who were victims of the Armenian genocide in Turkey. That was because of our principled commitment to freedom of conscience for everyone, not only for us. In recent decades, we have invested countless hours visiting religious, political, and intellectual leaders from around the globe, pursuing peaceful relationships with governments and among religious bodies while writing dozens of books and journals. We invite others to do the same.

Ever since the 1840s, we have been concerned with child abuse. At that time, during the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the Americas, child labor was a terrible problem. Young children who should have been in school or at play were sent to work in dangerous conditions in factories or cleaning chimneys. Many died, and many others were disabled for life. From then until the early 20th century, our voices were joined with many others, leading to legal restrictions on child labor. In recent years, we have also spoken out against using boys as soldiers, sex slavery, and the abuse of girls and women. We hope your religious communities can do the same.

The Protestant faith is addressing the great questions I heard in school in Germany, questions that now face all of humanity, but not as one more ideology. Of course, we Evangelicals talk about knowing God by faith in Jesus, but what we say about people and society can be shared by those who have different convictions about the divine. That is why our WEA team has participated in the movement to promote shared civilizational values from its beginning in Jakarta, in 2019.

In our WEA history, we see especially three values or principles that merit a place in a global platform of civilizational values:

- Humans have a unique God-given greatness which includes dignity and creativity. That is why we seek to help and respect people, regardless of race, age, or gender, while we may kill bacteria and viruses to do so.
- Humans possess a unique fallibility. Nature can cause a hurricane, flood, or an earthquake. People can cause a Holocaust, senseless wars, genocide, sexual abuse, slavery, revenge, and betrayal. The first account

of murder in the Bible is Cain killing his brother Abel, illustrating how our most human activity, religion, can become dysfunctional and unleash our vast fallibility.

- Helpless people need very practical love from others.

This is not a complete national ideology. But it is a substantial answer to Böckenförde's dilemma that is true to what I believe as a Christian.

Justice Böckenförde called our attention to a distinctive line in the preamble to our German constitution. Our post-war founders wrote that they were "conscious of their responsibility before God and man." This is not an atheist constitution, though some prominent Germans have been atheists. It is a constitution for people of multiple religions or no defined religion. It assumes there are civilizational moral values which we can identify and implement together. That is our task in the R20.

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