



Reports

Thomas Paul Schirrmacher

Militant secular worldviews
as state religions

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
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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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Schirmmacher 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 Breaks with the Pope' (2016), 'Corruption' (2016), 'Human Rights' (2014), 'Human trafficking' (2013), 'Fundamentalism: When Religion turns violent' (2013), and 'Racism' (2008).

Schirmmacher 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 Princeton Event

The R20 Princeton Conference on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was held in conjunction with the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. On 13–14 December 2023, international religious authorities and scholars representing the world's major faith traditions gathered in Princeton to discuss the future of the Universal Declaration. Princeton University's James Madison Program for American Ideals and Institutions hosted the conference, which was co-sponsored by the world's largest Muslim organization, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the Center for Shared Civilizational Values (CSCV), the R20, and the global Humanitarian Islam movement. Archbishop Schirrmacher was the senior representative of the World Evangelical Alliance to speak at this event.

The Speech

State religions that suppress competition have been a frequent occurrence in history and still exist in many places today. But the militant secular state religions of the present in western countries, which are fighting against their biggest competitors, Christianity and Islam, somehow manage to be considered **neutral**, and to be acting only in the name of human rights, not in the name of a truth believed and claimed only by them.

But it is precisely the essence of a state religion, which harasses and discriminates against people of other faiths, that it declares its truth to be the only reality and succeeds in making the population believe that its faith is identical with reality and/or in ensuring that the silent majority does not revolt.

Extreme forms of such ideologies under Stalin and Hitler show that this is possible both on the political left and on the political right, but also that state terror and militant truth claims can arise not only from religious but also from ideological fundamentalism. One can falsely use "God" to force everyone to think and live in a certain way, but one can also do this without God by militantly promoting a non-religious worldview.

Religions and non-religious worldviews are treated equally in the international understanding of human rights. "Freedom of Religion or Belief" means that religious and non-religious worldviews are to be treated equally by the state. This applies not only to their protection, but also to their violations. Whether it is a religious or a non-religious worldview that abuses the power and force of the state against its competitors makes no difference: Both lead to a massive violation of the human rights of others.

The term of global legal language "freedom of religion or belief" includes religious worldviews and non-religious beliefs. It protects the deepest convictions of humans, the conscience, the beliefs, the morals. When "freedom of religion or belief" is more briefly rendered as "freedom of religion," it always means not only freedom for religious people, but also freedom for people of other worldview systems, including atheistic and non-religious people. The famous judgment of

the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) of May 25, 1992 says, “Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society” for religious people as well as for “atheists, agnostics, and skeptics.”

The Soviet Union was an example of a state that suppressed other religions and worldviews in the name of its own secular state “religion,” or more precisely state worldview or state ideology. This was true for the biggest competitor, Christianity, for other religions such as Islam, as well as for competitors with similar secular views. The Soviet Union brutally persecuted even dissenting forms of communism, just as the medieval church persecuted Christian heretics.

What’s different about Finland or Australia (or whatever country) doing the same thing today?

First, an example from Australia: The Australian state of Victoria has prohibited, since 2020, not only all kinds of so-called conversion therapies but also “carrying out a religious practice, including but not limited to a **prayer**-based practice, a deliverance practice or an exorcism.”¹ It is quite clear that here a worldview with an absolute claim to truth forbade religions to carry out prayers and intervenes deeply in religious practices, even prescribing what one may and may not pray.

That the law of state religions is often bent against its competitors has been shown only too clearly in Finland, where a text from 2004 is part of the indictment, even though the law being applied did not exist then. Of course, you cannot sue people for things that happened before a law came into force; this is one of the oldest legal principles in existence. They found a way around that because the 2004 text was later cited again on the web. Päivi Räsänen, a medical doctor who has been a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1995 and has served as minister of the interior and party leader of the Finnish Christian Democrats, and Juhana Pohjola, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Missionary Diocese of Finland, have been charged over a pamphlet calling homosexual behavior a violation of Christian morality. The court case is going from court level to court level with contradicting decisions.

For me, it is gratifying, though irrelevant to our topic, that the courts in Helsinki ruled in favor of the defendants. The question of how the next court will rule is irrelevant for my criticism. In those Islamic countries, where Islam is the state religion in the strictest form, such as Pakistan, the Supreme Court often overturns the death sentence for blasphemy or apostasy thanks to courageous judges. And in Europe’s democracies, the victory of militant secular worldviews and ideologies that tolerate no competition is far from complete, with numerous landmark rulings by supreme courts putting overzealous law enforcement agencies in their place.

However, this does not change the fact that the Attorney General of Finland, as a representative of the secular state and with the support of ruling politicians and leading media, is taking up arms against a Christian minister of the interior (at the time of her statements) and a Lutheran bishop. And of course, they do

1 http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/num_act/cosppa20213o2021623/s5.html.

not only hit a large number of fellow-Christians thinking the same way, but also a large number of followers of Islam or other religions carrying the same convictions. And all this is because of a really minimal incident on the Internet, which hardly anyone would have known about without the indictment.

Of course, the whole thing has no direct effect on the well-being of the country or its citizens. It can be understood only in terms of the hatred being expressed by a new state religion that wants to completely oust the former state religion from the market. An example is to be made in order to set in motion a cycle of silence.

You are not a true citizen if you do not share the worldview of the powerful and those in power. At best, one is a second-class citizen, even as a bishop or former government minister. This has been the case in many states, when the state religion or state ideology turned whole classes of citizens into non-citizens. One could not really deprive them of their citizenship, but one could at least convey to them that they did not really belong here. The situation is no different and no better if an intolerant state religion or state ideology establishes itself secularly.

This kind of militant secularism creates a growing hatred and tension in Western societies without achieving any positive goal. It results in a new wave of intolerance, supremacism, division, which finally leads to direct violence. It acts as if it would be the incarnation of democracy and human rights, but in reality, it carries democracy to its grave.

It teaches citizens that they rightly can look down on people of all faiths, even though they represent the vast majority of people in the world. They speak about human dignity and rights, but de facto deny it to most people in the world. To achieve their goal, they deny any positive contribution of religions and religious people to society.

All world religions and all people of faith worldwide, who are opposed to misusing the State to promote violence and hatred against people with other beliefs, and who believe that religion belongs in the public square, but who do not want an intolerant government, that is all world religions and all people of faith worldwide believing in a wise separation of the State and religions and their religious leaders, often called by the technical term “secular” state, have to stand up, when the name “secular” is changed by militant secularism into a new form of state terror on others.

This is why the **World Evangelical Alliance** after seriously studying many documents and history went into a strategic official partnership with **Humanitarian Islam** worldwide, which can e. g. be found in the largest Muslim organization in the world, Nahdlatul Ulama from Indonesia. Together we stand against governments that try to impose a secular worldview as a new state religion.

Appendix I: The Finnish example

Päivi Räsänen, a medical doctor who has been a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1995 and has served as minister of the interior and party leader of the Finnish Christian Democrats, and Juhana Pohjola, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Missionary Diocese of Finland, have been charged over a pamphlet calling homosexual behavior a violation of Christian morality. A district court in Helsinki unanimously dismissed the charges on the grounds that it was not for the court to interpret biblical terms. The court ordered the prosecution to pay more than 60,000 Euros in legal costs and gave it seven days to appeal the verdict.

Retired minister Räsänen was charged with “hate speech” for sharing her faith-based views on marriage and sexual ethics in a 2019 tweet, a 2019 radio debate and a 2004 pamphlet. Bishop Pohjola was charged with publishing Räsänen’s pamphlet for his congregation more than 17 years ago. In a 2019 tweet, Räsänen questioned why the leadership of the Finnish Lutheran Church, of which she is an active member, sponsored an LGBT event called Pride 2019. The social media post included verses from the Bible that condemned homosexual acts as sinful. The tweet led to an investigation into Räsänen, which uncovered a church booklet she authored nearly 20 years ago.

In April 2021, the Finnish Prosecutor General’s Office filed three criminal charges against Räsänen, who was leader of the Christian Democrats from 2004 to 2015 and interior minister from 2011 to 2015. Two of the three charges against Räsänen were brought after the police strongly recommended that the prosecution not proceed. Räsänen’s remarks also did not violate Twitter or national broadcasting guidelines, so they remained freely available on their platforms.

The trial lasted two days. The prosecution cross-examined the bishop and Räsänen on their theology, claiming that the use of the word “sin” can be “harmful.” The defense argued that a conviction of Räsänen would significantly affect freedom of expression in Finland. What Räsänen had said and written was an expression of Christian doctrine, the defense argued. In its 30-page ruling. The court acknowledged that even though some may object to Räsänen’s remarks, “there must be a compelling social reason for interfering with and restricting freedom of expression.” The court concluded that there was no such justification.

The case has just been heard again by the Helsinki Court of Appeal. In the trial, the prosecutor showed all the arrogance and aggressiveness of a state ideology towards the religious beliefs of the defendants, if one believes the media coverage. “They can believe what they want, but they can’t talk about everything they believe,” the prosecutor said. Several times she asked Räsänen to recant. In general, the prosecutor seemed more like a preacher of new laws than a jurist committed to the law.

Appendix II: R20 Princeton Declaration



R20 Princeton Declaration

Towards a Global Consensus that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Embodies a Civilizational Vision that the World's Diverse Peoples, Faiths, and Nations Should Strive to Fulfill



14 December 2023 • Princeton, New Jersey USA

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world....”

~ Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948)

1. Whereas on 13 – 14 December 2023 faith leaders and scholars from around the world gathered in Princeton, New Jersey to discuss the future of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in conjunction with the 75th anniversary of the UDHR’s adoption by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948;
2. Whereas participants shared their wisdom and expertise concerning how best to achieve the following high-level objectives:
 - Ensuring that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems, in the 21st century;
 - Clarifying, strengthening, and disseminating sources of inspiration and support that exist within our respective traditions for the principles articulated by the UDHR, in order to promote broader acceptance of those principles;
 - Reinterpreting and/or otherwise addressing elements of religious teachings that encourage hatred, supremacism, and violence towards those of other faiths, or none;
 - Identifying shared values and establishing reciprocity among the world’s diverse peoples, cultures, and religions, by treating one another in accordance with the highest moral standards embraced by our respective traditions;
 - Preventing the weaponization of identity, whether on the basis of ethnic, religious, national, and/or ideological affiliations; and
 - Recovering ethical and spiritual resources, within our respective faith traditions, that will enable the world’s diverse religions and cultures to co-exist peacefully;
3. Whereas these senior religious and academic leaders concluded that the post-World War II international consensus — represented by the UN Charter and the UDHR — embodies, reflects, and even provides a political structure for realizing the most fundamental and noble values promoted by all religions, including universal love and compassion (Arabic: *rahmah*; Hebrew: *rachamim*; Greek: *agāpē*; Sanskrit: *karuṇā*), equality, honesty, justice, and peacemaking;

4. Whereas it is, therefore, eminently feasible for religions to acknowledge the principles of this international consensus and incorporate these principles within their respective teachings and worldviews;
5. Whereas there is an urgent need to apply religions' ethical and humanitarian teachings to the treatment of others, and affirm that all human beings, without exception, and not only members of one's own community, are entitled to benefit from the application of these teachings, including love, compassion, equality, honesty, justice, and peacemaking;
6. Whereas religious authorities have a moral and spiritual responsibility to ensure that their respective faiths serve as vehicles of mutual understanding and reconciliation rather than perpetuate the primordial cycle of identity-based hatred, tyranny, and violence;
7. Whereas the international consensus embodied within the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the only currently existing and viable framework for resolving identity-based conflicts — including those that occur between religions, and violence perpetrated in the name of religion;
8. Whereas the failure of global actors to respect and uphold the post-WWII international consensus as embodied in the UN Charter and UDHR framework is a primary cause of instability and conflict worldwide;
9. Whereas religious authorities — acting in service to God and humanity — should persistently and decisively work together to validate, preserve, and strengthen the post-war international consensus and demand consistency from all parties in its application;
10. Whereas it is not sufficient for these efforts to be confined to traditional religious appeals alone; they must be complemented by a deliberate, long-term strategy to mobilize the collective power of religion — including the support of people from all faiths — in a joint movement to attain this noble objective, in cooperation with governments and other civil society actors;
11. THEREFORE, we urge the United Nations General Assembly to recommend that all UN Member States distribute an electronic and/or hard copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in their national language(s), to all school children, through their respective ministries of education; and
12. We urge religious authorities of every faith and nation to marshal the power and influence of their respective spiritual traditions and communities to impact decision-making circles; halt armed conflicts raging in the Middle East, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other regions of the world; develop effective mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation that may lead towards the peaceful resolution of such conflicts; and join Nahdlatul Ulama as well as the G20 Religion Forum (R20) in expanding and strengthening the global Movement for Shared Civilizational Values.

Princeton, New Jersey (USA), 14 December 2023

Signed by:

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