



Reports

Thomas K. Johnson

Nihilism and Depopulation

Is the Solution Money or Meaning?

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
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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.

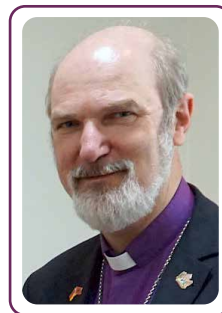
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all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



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson serves as Special Envoy to the Vatican and Special Envoy for engaging Humanitarian Islam at the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), which represents over 600 million Protestants in 143 countries world-wide. A widely published author on theology, ethics, and human rights, Professor Johnson also serves as senior theological advisor to the WEA and is co-chair of the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group. Among his recent books is *Humanitarian Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and the Clash of Civilizations: A New Partnership for Peace and Religious Freedom*, published by the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission.

Declining birthrates have weighed on my mind for 20 years, since I saw that the population explosion didn't happen. Then, from train windows crossing Eastern Europe, I saw empty villages and derelict public buildings. Who would want to move there now? Can anyone raise a family when there's hardly a store or a school in sight? But why are the young women from so many entire countries so hesitant to have children? It's surely partly their male partners and logistics: funds, childcare, house space, health care. But can the problem be partly ontological?

We sense more clearly than did our ancestors that humanity as a whole, not only my family, is facing threats of total nonbeing. Not only might we all die tomorrow, which everyone has always known, but we also face the darkness of nothingness. This is nihilism. No truth, no meaning, no norms, maybe not even any guilt. Why not consider generational suicide by the relatively painless method of not having children? Is there a convincing reason to have children? After all, they are noisy, expensive, and messy.

The many countries trying to solve the population crisis by providing money and childcare are not having much success. It is hard to solve an ontological problem with money. Nor is this existential issue submitting to political means, though many are trying. Globalization, it seems, has reduced the authority of the traditions that explained the meaning of child-raising for our ancestors. Anti-global populism, which is ironically almost global, is also an inadequate response to declining populations and their civilizations. It takes a lot of hard work to communicate a meaning giving heritage to the next generation, especially if that educational time competes with learning the international language and professional skills needed to support a family.

Is there a solution to nihilism that can be accepted and transmitted to the next generation by more than very small communities that are at work by day and by night? Why put in the effort? But meaning, it seems, is usually local and historically received. The structure of human awareness is comprised of universal, ontological questions for which we look for historically given answers. Those answers are usually religious, and it seems impossible for any single religion to provide meaning for more than a small portion of humanity. Freedom of religion and belief is truly foundational to address global nihilism, but there is no way for me to force you to honestly accept my firmly held beliefs. The best we can do is to use all our rational and ethical powers to convince each other. For example, the young couples in our church have enough children so that we renovated a large kids' part of the building. Why not come to see what we are doing? This may be the best solution for nihilism.

On meaning and suicide Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.¹

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."

¹ Camus, A. (2018). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

On the power of meaning, Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.² Originally, *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*.

“Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.”

Prof Sir Thomas K Johnson is a philosopher of culture and religion who served two academic programs led by anti-communist dissidents, The European Humanities University (Belarus) and The Institute of Fundamental Learning (Charles University). He taught at Protestant theological schools in eight countries and pastored three churches, two in the US and one in the former USSR. In 2003 he joined Martin Bucer Seminary and later became Vice President for Research. Since 2007 he has served the World Evangelical Alliance. He has been a consultant to the International Institute for Religious Freedom since its founding.

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² Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press.

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