

## Schirmmacher at the ETH Zurich: “The Label ‘Human Rights’ is ingenious”

In the main building of the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology Zurich (ETH) in a guest lecture organized by the [vbg Christlicher Hochschulverein Zürich](#) (a Christian university association in Zurich) and [Martin Bucer Seminary](#) on the topic of “Ethics without God? How much Belief do Human Rights need?” ([Flyer as PDF](#)), the President of the International Council of the International Society of Human Rights and Ambassador for Human Rights of the World Evangelical Alliance, Thomas Schirmmacher, underscored the term and the message behind “human rights.”

The Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich (the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology Zurich, or ETH) was founded in 1855. It has more than 500 professors, 10,000 employees, and 18,600 students. Its annual budget is more than EUR 1.5 billion. 21 Nobel Prize winners have been connected with the Institute.

According to Schirmmacher, human rights are above all in the first instance antecedent to the state. Schirmmacher emphasized that this has to do with the fact that being human precedes everything else, including all institutions and worldviews. Human rights, according to Schirmmacher, are not first able to bring about meaning when they are antecedent to the state and are used as a standard placed before the state. Rather, they also only give rise to meaning when they precede religious institutions. All religions and all religious groups have to let themselves be measured against whether they promote or restrict human dignity.

Schirmmacher, who has often spoken with many leaders of other religions about human rights during his extensive travels, said he did not wish to place a rational justification and a justification from his own religion over against each other. Instead, it is most convincing when both reach justifications that are valid for him as a Christian.

According to the scholar, who has completed a number of doctorates, the idea of human rights is indeed something peculiar. While on the one hand no one is able to agree upon a joint justification and every detailed question is a subject of spirited debate, human rights are, on the other hand, almost the sole element holding the free world together. Indeed, beyond that, Schirmmacher maintains that it is what unites humanity even if it is only paid lip service. Besides Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, Fiji, Tonga, Brunei, and the Vatican, all other countries on earth label themselves democracies with human rights standards. What's more, the Vatican is at the same time a forerunner in issues relating to human rights.

