

“Does religious freedom, religious harmony and interreligious dialogue contradict absolute truth claims?”

Thomas Schirmmacher

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Praise be to God, who created us and makes this day possible.

It is possible to advocate liberty, religious freedom and harmony, interreligious dialogue and freedom of conscience for others without holding their convictions to be true or sharing those convictions!

One has to differentiate that advocating the human rights and religious freedom of others, thus working toward religious harmony, does not automatically require to endorsing their claims to truth. In its resolution for religious freedom, the World Evangelical Alliance expresses this as follows: “The WEA differentiates between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and endorsing the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe” (‘Resolution on Religious Freedom ...’, World Evangelical Alliance’, General Assembly in Pattaya, Thailand, October 30, 2008, www.iirf.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/WEA_Res_ENG.pdf.)

Dialogue is not the task of relativists, that have lost deep convictions and are no longer really sure what the truth is. Dialogue, harmony and freedom come out of holy truth and it is those truth, that push us towards solidarity, peace and prosperity for all. If one is convinced of truth, one never has to fear to listen to others, and to exchange good arguments. And he can engage in interreligious dialogue without accepting that the dialogue partner also knows the truth – why should one dialogue then?

The same is true the other way round. Religious freedom and harmony do not emerge automatically when religious communities or non-religious people give up their truth claims or come to the agree that both sides know the truth already and there is nothing to discuss or dialogue. Governments can conduct war against each other even when they share the same religious convictions.

Even in the case of the two largest world religions, both monotheistic, Christianity and Islam, it is apparent that unity has not been achieved between the different theological schools in every detail. Denominations of those, which stand quite close to each other in matters of truth, nevertheless have frequently conducted religious wars against each other. Think a moment about the differences between Shiite and Sunni Islam or between Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic Christianity. Whenever these different wings are in a position to peacefully coexist in the same country, the reason is not because they agree about everything. Rather, it is either because they have been forced by the state to peacefully coexist (which hardly represents a permanent solution) or because they have themselves decided to limit their differences to the area of theology and to discussions about the faith and have decided to not argue it out in the political realm. Peace in the political realm cannot be required via theological uniformity.

In the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America it says at the beginning: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

The USA did not live up to its standards at that time. Afro-Americans still were kept as slaves, religious freedom was enormous, but did not extent beyond many forms of Christianity and the Jewish faith.

Western individualism often seems to come close to the idea, that every individual is his own ruler and lone cowboy. Yet in reality to be isolated from all other humans can in itself kill people, as the torture of solitary confinement proves.

Yet I think the message of the Declaration is “self-evident” and true: Allah created us human beings in a wonderful way and this must be the starting point for any discussion on human rights and politics. God created us not to be alone, but to live in solidarity, in solidarity with our nuclear and larger families, in solidarity with our communities, coworkers and tribes, in solidarity with the poor and enslaved.

One form of this solidarity is the State, where rulers protect all peaceful citizens and protect them from non-peaceful citizens. The State protects not only those likeminded, or of the same tribe or religious conviction, but all, as long as they do not question this monopoly of power. But solidarity also makes it necessary to protect the large number of peaceful believers from the small number of religious extremists that misuse the name of Allah and religion and most often kill more people of their own faith, than of others.

I thank Azerbaijan for doing such a great job in this kind of solidarity.

Praise be to God.

Bishop Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

*President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights
Associate Secretary General, World Evangelical Alliance*