

The past, present and future of the International Institute for Religious Freedom

Interview with Prof Dr Thomas Schirmmacher

Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Schirmmacher, PhD, DD, (born 1960) is President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights, and Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns (Theology, Theological Education, Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations, Religious Freedom, Research), which networks churches with approximately 600 million conservative Protestant Christians, chair of its theological commission, and director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, the largest research network for religious freedom and against persecution of Christians and other religions and world views.

Schirmmacher has authored and edited 102 books, which have been translated into 18 languages. His newest books include *Corruption* (2016), *Human Rights: Promise and reality* (2015), *Human trafficking: The Return to Slavery* (2014), *Fundamentalism: When religion turns violent* (2013), *Racism* (2012), *The persecution of Christian concerns us all: A systematic theology* (2011).

In 2009, Schirmmacher founded the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) with Prof Christof Sauer. In 2021, Schirmmacher was appointed the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, so has passed on leadership of the IIRF to Dr Dennis P. Petri. Executive Editor, Prof Dr Janet Epp Buckingham, interviewed Schirmmacher on the past, present and future of the IIRF.

Q. Why did you establish the IIRF?

In 2008 and 2009, Hermann Gröhe, German Member of Parliament and legal counsel for the Christian Democratic Union, which was in opposition at that time, wanted to call for a first-ever debate on the persecution of Christians for one hour in Parliament. They used our material, which at that time was more produced for church newsletters and prayer meetings. He got into huge trouble with his colleagues, because it was hard to prove the claims or present adequate data by the academic standards used for other areas of human rights. Gröhe was outraged afterwards about the thin and unreliable data we had given him. His sentence, "That must change, otherwise we never will repeat this," had enough effect on me and Professor Christof Sauer that we founded the IIRF, which today has offices on all continents. At a later event, I said to him, "Dear Mr. Gröhe, my deepest thanks for this most momentous rebuke in all my life."

The IIRF aims to work collaboratively with all who share its aims of supporting the defense of religious freedom by providing the necessary foundations of accurate information and understanding. These are the goals we spelled out at the beginning:

The establishment of reliable facts on the restriction of religious freedom.

Making available the results of such research to other researchers, politicians, advocates, courts, and the media.

The introduction of the subject of religious freedom into academic research and theological curricula around the globe, and initiating as many doctoral dissertations around freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) as possible.

Backing up our advocacy for victims of violations of religious freedom in the religious, legal, and political worlds with reliable and verifiable facts.

Q. How has the IIRF helped those under pressure for their faith?

We have initiated research, spoken at hearings in many government bodies, published a journal and many books, helped to establish several chairs at universities or seminaries around the globe, and gotten many politicians to speak up in public, as we promised to defend them with academic expertise should they come under fire. We have been involved in developing several UN statements. Of course, it is hard to prove in detail exactly how all this helped the persecuted. But we have many, many instances, where we can prove direct impact in relation to specific persons – for example, when lawyers equipped with our material won in court, or when we got governments to intervene directly after having been confronted with clear proof regarding certain situations. A 350-page IIRF book on apostasy in Islam has been used successfully as evidence in many cases of converts from Islam seeking asylum in different countries. We have had contact with many individuals who said that we made the difference.

Q. What have you been most proud of that the IIRF has accomplished?

In Tirana (Albania) in 2015, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, as pillars of the Global Christian Forum, came together for the first time for a conference on religious freedom, where we listened to firsthand reports from countries of concern. After having jointly apologized for our discrimination against and even persecution of adherents of other religious groups in the past, we issued a joint call on behalf of global Christianity to all political, religious, and worldview actors to end restrictions of FoRB. The IIRF's staff did a brilliant job, its reports were widely distributed around the globe, and our collection of all major global documents around the topic is still in print.

In the Gambia two years ago, extremist forces from abroad had developed a draft of a new constitution with sharia at its center and no separation between state and Islam. The IIRF provided expertise with the help of top lawyers around the

world, working with lawyers from Gambia. Finally, we were able to bring together all major Christian groups in the country and leaders of moderate Islam, who represented in combination three-quarters of the nation. The proposed changes of the text to include separation of church and state and to limit sharia to its traditional meaning in the Gambia (that is, family law) gained so much momentum that shortly afterwards, a large majority of the parliament stopped the process to develop a new constitution.

Q. Where would you like to see the IIRF grow next? What are your hopes for the new leadership?

My biggest dream would be that the IIRF would develop something like the Open Doors World Watch List, but for all religions and worldviews. Existing reports on global restrictions of FoRB are not based on equally extensive on-the-ground research. Many only gather existing information, mainly from the media; most are limited geographically or limited to one's own religion or to secular worldviews. The IIRF has developed the methodology and tools; the implementation is just a matter of funding.

The IIRF's new director, Dennis Petri, has already been working in this area, so besides bringing the organization into a new and younger generation with all the needed adjustments, he is well equipped to pursue this megaproject.

Q. Why is religious freedom important for Evangelicals?

For us Evangelicals, freedom of religion for all people of all faiths is not just an important political concept and a human right, but an integral part of our theological DNA. The conception that faith in God consists of an individual believing and trusting precludes all forms of compulsion and fraud in matters of belief or non-belief, as well as all questioning of an individual's convictions.

When the Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846, one of the four pillars was freedom of religion. Many churches still had little understanding of the concept; in Europe the system of state churches was still widely prevalent. The numerous pastors of the state churches, such as in England or Germany, who became involved in the Alliance were mostly considered traitors by their own churches. Gerhard Lindemann, in his habilitation (post-doctoral) treatise of over 900 pages, has traced how, during the second half of the 19th century, the Evangelical Alliance declared freedom of religion to be a European topic. He summarized his findings as follows: "With their engagement for freedom of religion the Alliance rendered a valuable service to the enforcement of civil freedoms in the countries concerned and made no insignificant contribution to the development of a European civil society ... with an influence extending even to Russia and Japan." (Lindemann 2011:843)

Let me say a bit more about some of Lindemann's important historical findings. The Homburg Conference for Religious Freedom of 1853 was a milestone in the history of the Alliance and of tolerance in Germany and Europe (263-267). The core result was the rejection of all clerical violence against seceders and the rejection of any use of state violence by certain churches against others (266). This principle was deliberately applied not only to Christians but to all religions, which naturally resulted in sharp protests on the part of Protestant state churches (267-272).

In 1861, a French pastor first put forward the brand-new thesis, which came to prevail more and more within the Alliance, that "freedom of religion guarantees state order and its intrinsic peace" (592), whereas suppression of individual freedom of religion feeds discord and withdraws from the state its God-given foundation!

When the Alliance sent a delegation in 1858 to protest against Sweden, whose highest court, the Royal Court of Justice, had expelled six women who had converted from Lutheranism to Roman Catholicism (!), from the country, and when the Alliance demanded freedom of religion for these Catholics, a storm of protest arose all over Europe (295-300). The Alliance was significantly involved in the process that eventually led the Swedish parliament, in 1860, to abrogate all punishments for leaving the Lutheran state church.

The Alliance's broad-mindedness appeared also in the fact that they intervened with the Sultan not only on behalf of converts from Islam to Protestantism, but also on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Church (300). In Iran, they stood up for the so-called Nestorians (610-613).

There is a long history of religious freedom in Germany. Audiences that the Alliance was granted with the Prussian king, such as in 1855 in Cologne and again in 1857 (286f), always involved freedom of religion. The same applies to the conversations that Alliance secretaries had with the German Emperor William I and the Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1875 (919). An Alliance deputation to Emperor Franz Joseph I and subsequent talks with the prime minister and education minister resulted in noticeable relief for Protestants and, in 1880, even in their legal recognition (913).

The same is true also for the visit by participants at the International Alliance Conference, which met in New York, to U.S. president Ulysses S. Grant and his cabinet in 1873 (755-756). The only difference was that the U.S. government did not have to be persuaded of the benefits of religious freedom.

In my opinion the Evangelical Alliance has been quite successful for more than 170 years in maintaining a balance between a strong commitment to religious freedom for its own members, and for Christian churches of all confessions, and an

equally strong and clear commitment to the religious freedom of all people, even the non-religious.

It has frequently been objected that the IIRF, although scientifically completely independent, is still associated with a large religious community. It is exactly the other way around, though. Evangelicals should be praised for having an institution that expresses concern for the freedom of all people. All large religious communities and ideological groups should also have such an institution! If religions and ideologies do not stand up actively and organize for freedom of religion, who else will? I have a dream that one day even Islamic groups will quite naturally be devoting research and advocacy efforts to this topic, as is already the case in Indonesia. One might just as logically ask whether women would be welcome in politics without the advocacy of women's associations.

References

Gerhard Lindemann. 2001. *Für Frömmigkeit in Freiheit: Die geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz im Zeitalter des Liberalismus (1846-1879)*. Münster: LIT Verlag.