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Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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Alarm: Where are the global Christian church networks taking a stand against the persecution of Christians?

Interview by Christian Daily International with Archbishop Prof. Dr. Thomas Paul Schirmacher

By launching the recent German-language Yearbook on Religious Freedom by the International Society for Human Rights and the International Institute for Religious Freedom, you sounded the alarm not only about the growing violation of religious freedom worldwide, but also about the diminishing engagement of global Christian church networks.

I cannot tell how many people pray or where global denominations stand on their convictions, but I can see that organised prayer and advocacy work by churches and global networks, including evangelical networks, is in decline. Donations and funds are decreasing everywhere. Church leaders in countries of concern of all churches tell me during my visits, that they feel, that the interest in them is less than a decade ago, eg the Syrian-Catholic Patriarch in Lebanon, evangelical leaders in Mali or Gambia or the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch in Syria. While major advocacy organisations and NGOs focusing on religious freedom continue to do a great job, there has been a significant decline in recent years.

Can you give some specific examples?

Yes of course, For example, the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church has no information on its website for 2024 or 2025 (<https://idop.org/web/>). Thankfully, several NGOs are offering material for local churches for 2 November 2025. A decade ago, IDOP was a major tool for uniting the church worldwide in prayer. The Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, which was once a major force in advocacy work, no longer exists. The World Council of Churches no longer employs any full-time staff to work on this issue. The Catholic Church is in a better position as they have global networks of nuncios, but even they delegate most of the work to successful NGOs such as 'Church in Need', rather than engaging in an organised effort e. g. For research centered in the Vatican.

Mentioning 'Church in Need'. Are there not many active evangelical organisations as well?

Yes, but for all the connection to evangelical denomination is loosening and they grow into a more ecumenical network. E. g. the International Institute for Religious Freedom, of which I am honorary President, has stepped up its work considerably under the

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younger directors who took over from me and Christof Sauer in 2021. They are a good example as the IIRF is now fully independent of any church network. The fact that it is a world leader in advocating religious freedom for all religions, is not favored by all churches. Or take your own media: Information on Christian persecution events spreads around the world quicker than ever, especially through the active involvement of Christian Daily International on all continents. However, CDI is fully independent and driven by individuals who want this topic to be on the daily agenda.

You were out of business fighting religious freedom violations and persecution of Christian for some time. Can you tell us a bit more about this private side?

I wrote my first booklet on persecution while I was still a student at seminary, and this topic has been a priority in my life ever since. When I contracted Covid and developed long-term symptoms, Like many others with long-Covid, I developed ADHD-like symptoms, which, incidentally, too many people used as a moral argument against me. I experienced what is known as 'brain fog' more and more frequently, and most days I was unable to interact with other people. I finally stepped down as Secretary General of the WEA in March 2024, which looking back today was too late. Yet I took it out of God's hands, thinking that I had done my part in God's kingdom. But I struggled with the fact that my work against persecution had come to an end. I resigned from all my jobs and obligations, except for my honorary positions, which did not require daily work, such as President of the ISHR and President of IIRF. Towards the end of 2024, 1.5 years after my meltdown started, specialists specialised doctors from California and Israel found out what had actually happened to my brain and many others like me and how to repair. My strength returned and the ADHD symptoms started to vanish. In 2025, I travelled again to meet with governments, eyewitnesses, and churches in more than 50 countries. I knew that helping the persecuted church and fighting for freedom of religion or belief, as well as the whole range of human rights, had to become the number one priority in my life again.

But, to be honest, I was shocked by what I found after being away for so long. The ecumenical consensus to combat discrimination and persecution appeared to have disappeared.

Was there ever such a thing as an 'ecumenical consensus'?

At a Global Christian Forum conference in Tirana, Albania, in 2015, representatives from the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship came together to discuss discrimination, persecution, and religious freedom. The conference volume, which is available in print, shows that eyewitnesses from 50 countries were heard and that we agreed to work closely together on this issue from that point onwards. However, looking back ten years later, it seems that nothing has come of it. The GCF no longer addresses the issue, and there is no official collaboration on it between the four organisations behind it, which represent virtually all of world Christianity. In 2011, the Vatican, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) signed the document 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World', which addressed freedom of mission and interreligious dialogue. The period from 2006 to 2011 was the most inspiring time of my

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life. While the Vatican and the WCC continue to emphasise its importance, the Evangelicals have more or less forgotten about it.

What do you think is the reason behind it?

One reason for this is the growing anti-ecumenical stance. A decade ago, it was taken for granted that martyrdom took precedence over theological disputes and that the enemies of Jesus Christ did not distinguish between churches. Today, however, it seems that Catholics are helping Catholics, Evangelicals are helping Evangelicals, and so on. You easily can find this in several Christian reports on persecution worldwide. Those who dislike this development find their place in NGOs that work for everyone.

Many Evangelicals claim that they may cooperate with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches on political or humanitarian issues, but not on worship or evangelism. Yet, in reality, most do not cooperate with either of these churches at a global or regional level. There is hardly any meaningful global cooperation in advocacy other than NGOs or individuals like me bridging the gap. Recently, I visited the Vatican, where I was welcomed by bishops and priests from Nicaragua whom we had helped to free from prison. For many Evangelicals, this was further evidence of my overly ecumenical stance as an Evangelical. To add: I am glad that the Pentecostal World Fellowship is leveling things up, but I wish they would set up a proper office to work directly with governments and the media. This is not a job for freelancers alone.

Let me return to the topic of the relevance of global evangelical networks. What has been your experience when travelling?

We recently visited the Kurdish Autonomous Region, which has become a safe haven for many Christians and other religious minorities who have been persecuted in neighbouring countries, something Evangelical leaders should praise the Muslim government for day and night! We met four ministers, four archbishops, of course evangelical leaders, and the heads of several religions, as well as visiting the refugee camps. Evangelicals like me are very welcome in the country. I work with the Kurds since 1985. While we were there, a new church sponsored by Samaritan's Purse was just opened with the government providing the land. A dozen evangelical humanitarian organisations are active here. Yet they had never heard of the WEA, the Lausanne Movement, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Council of Churches or the Global Christian Forum. I do not know of one thankful statement by any of those bodies concerning the Kurdish Autonomous Region.

We visited Syria and found the same situation there. World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, Tearfund and the ACT Alliance work with the Syrian Orthodox Church's humanitarian arm across the whole country. The IIRF and others gather data and report on the discrimination faced by religious minorities. However, none of the government officials, opposition party leaders or humanitarian organisations we met had ever heard of the mentioned global networks.

What do you propose to the churches?

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Read “Christian Witness ...” of 2011 and read the “Message of the Tirana Consultation” of 2015 and let us once again agree to make this a priority.

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