



Interreligious dialogue and respectful societies need the Parliaments of the World

A personal report on why I believe Parliaments are so important for interreligious dialogue and assuring peace between adherents of different religions and worldviews in our countries

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By Archbishop Thomas Schirrmacher

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Dear Dr President H. E. Dr Tula, dear President H. E. Fontana,
Distinguished Presidents, Members of Parliament, Ambassadors, and esteemed fellow Religious Leaders,

I believe that parliaments can play a crucial role for interreligious dialogue and harmony for three reasons.

- 1. There are almost no parliaments that are mono-religious; most parliaments have members belonging to several religions. This is even true in countries with a state religion where the majority of MPs comes from one religion, as in Iran.*
- 2. Parliaments and MPs have the opportunity to invest more time and energy than members of the executive government in issues that are not just looking for an executive solution or a short-term answer; they can invest more time and energy in listening to others and getting to know each other.*
- 3. This is also true between parliaments; here the issues can be much broader than the diplomatic relations between the two countries of those parliaments.*

Some recent **examples** of activities provide a list of possible ways for parliaments and MPs to promote interfaith dialogue and harmony:

+ In most parliaments, the main religions and worldviews of a country are represented by MPs. The interesting question is therefore how to encourage inter-religious dialogue between them. One possibility, which has been tested with the help of ISHR and IIRF, is that members of the same parliament who belong to different religions each bring a high representative of their religion and that these two people start a dialogue with each other. Thus e.g. Muslim MPs and top imams meet officially with a Christian MPs and bishops.

+ The same is possible across parliaments. E.g. in Berlin we organized a meeting of five Muslim MPs from Iran with five Christian MPs from Germany. Each side also brought a top religious leader with them (myself for the Christian side).

+ Unusual combinations are possible. In 2023, for example, I accompanied Indonesian Muslim leader Yahya Cholil Staquf to visit US Senator Mitt Romney in his office to discuss religious freedom issues in Southeast Asia. Romney was accompanied by Professor W. Cole Durham Jr, the leading scholar on religious freedom issues from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Mitt Romney's religion. (Durham and I have worked together for years, contributing to various panels at the UN Human Rights Council, the OSCE, ODHRE and the EU Parliament).

<https://thomasschirmacher.net/blog/the-secretary-general-of-wea-meets-senator-mitt-romney-discussing-religious-freedom-matters/>

+ Human rights committees in parliaments are a good place to discuss freedom of religion or belief and inter-faith harmony. If such a committee devotes a session to these issues and invites religious leaders of the country's main religions to discuss them, this can often prove to be extremely fruitful. You can also invite an expert or two. Such a closed session is a much better place to discuss even complicated issues than the public or the media. I was involved in such meetings e.g. with parliaments in the Gambia, Ethiopia, Brazil, Germany and Sweden.

<https://thomasschirmacher.net/blog/gambia-interreligious-dialogue-bears-fruit-against-extremist-tendencies/>

+ At a more sophisticated level, requiring much more organisation, two human rights committees from two countries with different majority religions can plan a joint meeting with the same format, especially if the two religions are a majority religion in one country and a minority religion in the other. Or, independently of a human rights committee, two parliaments can jointly organise a conference on inter-religious dialogue, especially if the countries involved have different majority religions. For example, this was organised

between the parliaments of Germany and Azerbaijan in Berlin, with a large Muslim and Christian presence and several minority religions in both countries. Many parliamentarians and religious leaders said afterwards that they had gained a much better understanding of the religious history and background of the other country and the challenges of working towards inter-religious harmony.

<https://thomasschirmacher.net/blog/wer-die-wahrheit-kennt-will-interreligioesen-dialog/>

+ Latin American Parliamentarians in the House of Lords in the UK

<https://thomasschirmacher.net/blog/schirmacher-spricht-im-britischen-parlament/>

+ In most countries with a Christian majority, MPs organise an annual National Prayer Breakfast, modelled on the one in Washington. This was originally a purely Christian event, but it has become common in many countries for non-Christian leaders to pray and for MPs or ambassadors from non-Christian backgrounds to be invited. I have witnessed the presence of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other leaders in Washington or at National Prayer Breakfasts in Austria, Albania, Germany or South Korea. The main speakers in Washington have included the (Muslim) King of Jordan or the (Buddhist) Dalai Lama, or in Germany the (Muslim) President of Albania with a delegation of parliamentarians from Muslim-majority countries.

+ The IIRF together with experts of several religions and MPs from most parties in the German speaking parliaments each year publish the “Jahrbuch für Religionsfreiheit” (Yearbook of Religious Freedom), which is handed to all members of the German speaking parliaments and then is used in the yearly one-hour debate on the state of the relations of religions to each other in the parliament. The editors of the yearbook work in close relationship with the (executive) government’s report on Freedom of Religion or Belief worldwide and are involved in the experts hearing of the parliament about this report. E.g. in April 2024 I testified spoke at a public hearing of the German Bundestag’s Human Rights Committee on the German government’s Third Report on the Global Situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief, which specifically highlighted indigenous beliefs. I emphasised that religion and belief are “constitutive of being human” and thus of people’s innermost convictions and identity. Therefore, I stressed, every state should ensure that its foreign policy is based on a sound understanding of religion, interfaith relations and the promotion of FoRB. I also noted that while many countries, including Germany, have a separation of religion and state, religion and politics cannot be separated, as religion is part of democracy and FoRB permeates all human rights. “You cannot take the issue out of the equation,” I reminded the German parliamentarians present.

+ Similar annual reports by commissions or groups of MPs to their parliament or the government are produced in many countries, such as the US, UK or the EU Parliament, and can be used to promote interfaith dialogue. I have testified at hearings around such reports in the EU Parliament, the UK House of Lords, the House of Representatives, the parliaments of Romania and Estonia, and always found that the interfaith dialogue is stimulated by expert scientific evaluations.

Let me add to personal examples:

+ In September 2024, I spoke on a multi-faith panel at the Faith & Freedom Summit IV at the Latin American Parliament in Panama City. In this speech, entitled "Achieving FoRB for all through Diplomacy", I reminded the participating parliamentarians and delegates from various Latin American nations that FoRB is not just a legal principle, but rather a litmus test for human dignity, social harmony and the strength of democracy. I explained that diplomacy is not just about statecraft, but the art of bridge-building, which involves opening channels of trust across borders, faiths and political divides. I also argued that interfaith dialogue strengthens states internally and externally for these reasons. The Faith & Freedom panel has been held three times in the European Parliament, the first time the format of mixed panels of MEPs and religious leaders and experts has been held on another continent. It was such a success that the format will be taken to other continents.

+ In October 2022, I participated in a high-level meeting of the European Commission on "Freedom of religion with regard to religious slaughter" in the EU parliament in Brussels, where MPs, representative of member states and top religious leaders from the Muslim and the Jewish communities presented the case of religious slaughtering. Presenting the Christian view on practical issues of daily religious life and religious rituals, I stressed, why the Christian churches, who have do not practise such religious slaughtering, expect the EU Parliament to keep up the freedom of religions, who practise such rituals. Religious people should not need to feel sorry for what they believe and how they practically implement their beliefs. Rather, I emphasized, it is the mandate of the parliaments to protect these believers through solid and thought through laws. Speaking from a Christian perspective defending Jewish and Muslim practices, I stated in front of delegates from the Jewish and Muslim community, that the protection of religious freedom is a far-reaching human right that also extends to practical questions of daily life.