

# Bonner Querschnitte

## Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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## BQ 547 – No. 30/2018

### “Something is starting to move”

#### Interview with the Christian media magazine pro

(Bonn, 31.08.2018) 70 years ago, on August 23, 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded. The theologian Thomas Schirmacher talks about the history of the “World Council of Churches”, why Catholics are not members – and why he sees a missionary departure also in Germany.

**pro: The World Council of Churches (WCC) turns 70 on Thursday. Why does it exist?**

**Thomas Schirmacher:**  
The WCC originally emerged from the evangelical movement, from the revival movement. As early as the middle of the 19th century Christians were convinced that it was detrimental to the proclamation of the Gospel if they were so divided. In conjunction with the World Conferences for Mission in 1927 and 1937, the forerunner of the WCC, the Faith and Order Commission, was



Thomas Schirmacher welcomes Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in front of Geneva Cathedral for the WCC's 70th anniversary service.  
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established. The WCC developed from this in 1948. The Faith and Order Commission continues to exist; it is, so to speak, the theological commission of the WCC. Political and church unification movements came at the same time. It is no coincidence that the United Nations was also founded at this time.

**348 churches are members of the WCC. Ecumenism is first thought of as a dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. But, ironically, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is not a full member of the WCC. Why is that?**

The WCC would have liked to see this from the beginning. There is a corporate working committee between the WCC and the RCC, but before the Second Vatican Council the Catholics had asserted the claim: The Roman Catholic Church represents the church on earth – and is therefore the ecumenical church.

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### The RCC would therefore already have problems to say: World Council of CHURCHES; it only exists in the singular?

Back then, yes. After the Second Vatican Council, understanding opened up. Today, relations are much closer. The Catholic Church is, for example, a full member of the Faith and Order Commission. But one must not forget: If the Catholic Church were a member of the WCC, two thirds of all members would be Catholic. This would mean that two thirds of all positions would also have to be filled by Catholics.

### You as Associate Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) participate in talks with the WCC. Is the WEA a competitor or a partner of the WCC?

The long history and roots of the WCC certainly lie within the ranks of the WEA. In the 1960s, however, there was an alienation between the WEA and the WCC. The liberal churches, especially from Germany, increasingly set the tone – also financially. The conservative confessional movement, on the other hand, strove against liberal theology, which was, among others, represented by Rudolf Bultmann. It came to a rift. But I say self-critically that the WCC and the WEA were too heavily influenced by the Cold War. The WCC denied any kind of persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union, while the American influenced Alliance lamented persecution of Christians, but then again especially in the communist countries. The persecution of Christians in Islamic countries was virtually non-existent in the discussion.



Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I preaches at the 70th anniversary service of the WCC in Geneva Cathedral. In the background the WCC presidium © BQ/Warnecke

### What happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

After the Cold War, the funding of the WCC by the liberal churches declined sharply. The South became more conservative, more evangelical, pro-evangelization. The member churches from the Global South were predominantly evangelical. At the same time, the Orthodox churches became free of state oppression and spoke out very clearly. The WCC had hitherto been a pioneer in the notion that practicing homosexuality is not a sin. The Orthodox protested loudly. The result: There has been no official statement by the WCC on homosexuality since around 2000. The Archbishop of Canterbury was asked at a press conference at a WCC meeting in Korea in 2010 what he thought about homosexuality. His answer: You know that we are not going to comment on that here. Ask me when I get back to London.

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### Pope calls for evangelism

#### What is the relationship to the WEA like today?

Very good. The WCC wrote a mission paper some time ago. Due to our good relationship, such documents are automatically sent to the dialogue partners for review. We replied that we approved everything in the document: women's equality, commitment to peace, social justice and so on. Only: We wouldn't necessarily call all this mission. And above all, we missed the aspect that is most important to us in mission: evangelism. We were then asked to make a counterproposal. We wrote a passage saying that the "verbal form of mission" is the starting point of the mission and indispensable. This passage survived all revisions.

#### How does the Catholic Church see the WCC today?

Pope Francis was the guest of honour at the official celebrations of the WCC's 70th anniversary. It was the first time that a Pope did not associate ecumenism with the papal office. He then said that, beside all the nice stuff, he had to emphasize something: The WCC was founded for mission and evangelism. But that had fallen from view. After all, there is no unity of the churches without mission and evangelism. Saying this he shares the criticism of the Evangelicals.



Pope Francis addresses the WCC's 70th anniversary central committee in Geneva © Thomas Schirmacher

#### Some Christians criticize ecumenical aspirations for watering down biblical teaching. What do you make of this accusation?

In the WEA there has never been the notion that unity is possible while shirking doctrine. This is also the official view of the Catholic Church. This is also in the founding document of the WCC. That is also what the Faith and Order Commission is there for. In a sense, it is the "noble commission", i.e. the one that ultimately decides. Doctrine is not negotiable.

#### Who can become a member of the WCC? For example, could Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons join in?

The WCC has a creed that every member must sign. Therein included are the classical doctrines of early Christianity: the Trinity, Jesus as true man and true God, the vicarious atoning death of Jesus on the cross, the sole redemption through Jesus Christ. There have already been discussions about whether there are other ways to salvation. But there is no WCC document to date that other religions can bring salvation.

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## “We urgently need the help of the churches of the Global South”

### What was your best experience with the WCC?

I am thinking, for example, of the 2011 document “Christian witness in a multi-religious world” developed by the WCC, the WEA and the Vatican over a five-year period. The text begins with the words: “Mission is deeply rooted in the nature of the Church. Therefore it is indispensable for every Christian to proclaim God’s word and to witness his or her faith in the world.” At least on paper, all discussion about the importance and what mission is all about has thus ended. And this without giving up the doctrine.

### Are the liberal forces falling behind globally?

From my point of view, yes. On the one hand, the influence was mainly shaped by finances, personnel and politics, and not by an influence that was based on the liveliness of the churches and thus corresponded to the actual situation. Just as with the Evangelicals everything was firmly in American hands – I am self-critical on this point. There was no question that the WCC treated the Global South more as children than as equal partners. In June 2018, two countries applied to host the WCC World Church Conference in 2021, which is a bit like the granting of the Olympic Games: Germany with Karlsruhe and South Africa with Cape Town. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), had travelled to Geneva especially to present the German application. One had the impression that here the roles were reversed. The South Africans presented their application, as the Germans would have done 20 years ago: That they have the support of the state, how many millions they get therefrom, what is going well technically and how many hotels they have. Interestingly, the EKD has not only shown a very nice video, but clearly stated: We urgently need the help of the churches from the Global South. In the video from Germany many evangelical missionary active people were shown. This tells me that something is in motion. With a large majority, the delegates opted for Karlsruhe.



Thomas Schirmacher with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (centre) and Metropolitan Gennadios, WCC vice-president, in Geneva Cathedral for the WCC's 70th anniversary service © BQ/Warnecke

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### Do you expect from this an awakening for Germany as well?

In any case, it is positive when German churches, including the Evangelical churches, place their hopes not only on their historical strength or only on American concepts, but also on the spiritual impulses from the Global South. This is a trend reversal. I think something is starting to move.

### Thank you very much for the interview!

*The questions were asked by Nicolai Franz*

### Downloads and Links:

- [Photo 1](#) and [photo 2](#): Thomas Schirmmacher welcomes Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in front of Geneva Cathedral for the WCC's 70th anniversary service © BQ/Warnecke
- [Photo 3](#) and [photo 4](#): Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I preaches at the 70th anniversary service of the WCC in Geneva Cathedral. In the background the WCC presidium © BQ/Warnecke
- [Photo 5](#): Pope Francis addresses the WCC's 70th anniversary central committee in Geneva © Thomas Schirmmacher
- [Photo 6](#): 70-year anniversary ceremony in Bossey: Prince Guneratnam, President of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the WCC © BQ/Warnecke
- [Photo 7](#): Thomas Schirmmacher with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (centre) and Metropolitan Gennadios, WCC vice-president, in Geneva Cathedral for the WCC's 70th anniversary service © BQ/Warnecke

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