

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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A call for joint commitment to religious freedom

First symposium on religious freedom at the FTH

(Bonn, 24.02.2025) From February 13–14, the Chair for Religious Freedom of the Giessen School of Theology (FTH) hosted the first international symposium on religious freedom. Experts from various countries drew attention to the multifaceted interplay between aspiration, reality and the resulting challenges in the area of religious freedom.

In his introductory remarks, the President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Paul Schirmmacher, called on Christians to stand up confidently for freedom of religion and belief. The root of the idea of a free practice of religion goes back to Christian and Jewish movements of the 16th and 17th centuries. Over time, it has spread to all religions and worldviews, and each direction now “must find its own way from its central teachings toward religious freedom”. In this context, mutual dialogue and discussion with all faiths is crucial to prevent religious extremism and ensure peaceful coexistence.

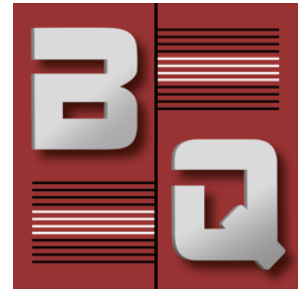


Thomas Schirmmacher during his speech © FTH

Schirmmacher also emphasized that religious freedom, persecution, and martyrdom must again play a central role in systematic theology and concluded his statement with an appeal: “This is a call to Christian scholars in all relevant fields of academic research to engage in religious freedom studies and to join the growing global community of scholars. But it is also a call to Christian scholars to collaborate with scholars of all faiths or no faith, and to prepare the results of their research so that they can be shared and discussed with any scholar of good will around the world, and so that they can be used by media, governments, and parliaments, which usually represent a mix of worldviews.”

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Theological Commission of the European Evangelical Alliance europeanea.org

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Yearbook on Religious Freedom of the Commission for Religious Freedom of the German and the Austrian Evangelical Alliance iirf.global/jahrbuch

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Political controversies and normative foundations

According to the organizers, religious freedom is a central but often controversially discussed aspect in a world characterized by cultural diversity and different value systems. “There is a lot to be done,” said Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, Senior Professor of Human Rights at the Friedrich Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, summing up the current situation. His opening lecture at the conference focused on political controversies and the normative foundations of religious freedom as a human right.

Bielefeldt explained that the opponents of religious freedom are primarily autocratic states, but that the concept also meets with skepticism in liberal circles. This is due to clichés about religion, a one-dimensional concept of freedom, and a false reaction to the cultural struggle to instrumentalize religious freedom. Bielefeldt also examined the normative foundations. Freedom of religion is a central human right that includes freedom of thought, conscience, religion and worldview. It is indispensable for a holistic understanding of human rights and exercises a kind of watchdog function that can protect against an overstretching of human rights in the direction of a global humanitarian religion.



Thomas Schirmacher in conversation with Heiner Bielefeldt and Dennis P. Petri © FTH

Plural reality and diverse challenges

According to Volker Kauder, honorary professor of political ethics and religious freedom at the Giessen School of Theology, the symposium on religious freedom should be a starting point for presenting the topic to the public not only politically but also scientifically. Dr. Christoph Raedel, Professor of Systematic Theology at the FTH, presented the thesis in his paper that identity politics harms the common good and the coexistence of people in society because it ideologically divides society into two groups of oppressors and oppressed. Raedel called for trust to be strengthened through humility and courage of conviction.

In further lectures and workshop reports, various experts from different countries had their say. Among other things, the topics included impulses from the New Testament on the subject of persecuted Christians, a theological treatment of persecution and risk, as well as personal testimonies. Dr. Dennis Petri, Director of the International Institute for

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Religious Freedom, introduced the challenges of observing even hidden violations of religious freedom. The databases of various actors in the field of religious freedom to date cannot capture everything; there are still 'blind spots'. Petri advocated a holistic approach that uses a variety of complementary tools.



The Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, Dennis P. Petri, during his lecture © FTH

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1:** Thomas Schirmmacher during his speech © FTH
- **Photo 2:** Thomas Schirmmacher in conversation with Heiner Bielefeldt and Dennis P. Petri © FTH
- **Photo 3:** The Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, Dennis P. Petri, during his lecture © FTH
- Information about the event: <https://fth.de/veranstaltung/symposium-religionsfreiheit/>
- The conference program: <https://bonner-querschnitte.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Symposium-Religious-Freedom-Conference-program.pdf>
- FTH press release on the event (in German): <https://fth.de/religionsfreiheit-weltweit-bedroht-internationale-experten-diskutieren-an-der-fth-giessen/>
- Statement by Thomas Schirmmacher on the International Symposium on Religious Freedom: <https://thomasschirmmacher.net/?p=23116>
- Website of the International Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://iirf.global>

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