

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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Focus on religious freedom: Swiss churches sign joint declaration

In his keynote speech, Thomas Schirmacher emphasizes that no state can function without religious freedom

(Bonn, 01.12.2025) Fifty years ago, silent marches took place in Bern and Zurich (Switzerland). Thousands protested against the persecution of Christians in communist Eastern Europe. On the occasion of this anniversary, the Swiss churches in Bern drew attention to the worldwide threat to religious freedom.

The conference “Focus on Religious Freedom” took place on November 7 at the Kornhausforum in Bern. On this occasion, Christian churches and communities published a joint message reminding people that religious freedom is a human right that continues to be violated worldwide. “Human rights explicitly protect freedom of conscience, religion, and belief,” the message stated. “According to the self-understanding of the Christian churches and their view of humanity, there is an unconditional duty to defend these rights for all people and religious communities.”

The statement was signed by Charles Morerod, President of the Swiss Bishops' Conference (SBK), Rita Famos, President of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Switzerland (EKS), Frank Bangerter, Bishop of the Christian Catholic Church, as well as the presidents of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance (SEA) and the umbrella organization of free churches and Christian communities in Switzerland.



Representatives of all Swiss churches © IIRF/Martin Wamecke



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page 1/3

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The event brought together politicians, theologians and those affected: Federal Councilor Albert Rösti and National Councilor Sibel Arslan exchanged different perspectives on responsibility and faith. Contemporary witnesses from India, Iraq and Nigeria reported on courageous resistance to discrimination and violence, while theologians such as Hansjörg Stückelberger and Thomas Schirmacher recalled the spiritual roots and political significance of religious freedom.

Keynote address by Archbishop Thomas Schirmacher: Religious freedom as a universal human right

In his keynote address, Archbishop Prof. Dr. mult. Thomas Paul Schirmacher, President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), reminded the audience that religious freedom is a universal human right that protects the inner convictions of every human being. “It’s about what makes a person a person,” he said.

Schirmacher warned against simplistic political solutions, such as attempts by Western powers to end the persecution of Christians by military means. At the same time, he used the example of Syria to show that in certain countries, minorities such as Christians, Yazidis or Druze can only survive if there are international protection structures in place.

He emphasized that the commitment to persecuted Christians must always be part of a larger whole—the freedom of belief and non-belief. “Christians are not only fighting for Christians, but for the freedom of every human being to believe or not to believe.” Martin Luther had already demanded that the state protect all citizens, “even the Turks”—who were then a symbol of Muslims. Those who claim religious freedom only for themselves betray their own foundations.

Using current examples, Schirmacher described the rise of religious extremism in India, Nigeria and some Islamic countries—a development that is worrying because it links violence with religious legitimacy. In Turkey, there is no real religious freedom for anyone, not even for Muslims who want to believe differently from the state religious authority (Diyanet). “Imams receive their sermons by mail—even freedom of preaching has been abolished,” he said.



Thomas Schirmacher during his keynote speech in Bern © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

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- **Photo 3** and **Photo 4**: Thomas Schirmacher during his keynote speech in Bern © IIRF/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 5**: The conference program © IIRF/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 6**: Alevi and Christian – National Councilor Sibel Arslan and Thomas Schirmacher © IIRF/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 7**: The Swiss television reported in the evening © IIRF/Martin Warnecke
- Website of the conference “Focus on Religious Freedom”:
<https://religionsfreiheit-im-fokus.ch>
- Photo gallery of the event:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/sekfeps/albums/72177720330213056/>
- Further press releases on the conference:
 - <https://christkatholisch.ch/?p=22508>
 - <https://each.ch/?p=111740>
 - <https://reformiert.info/de/politik/berner-tagung-religionsfreiheit-ist-zentral-fuer-eine-demokratie-25351.html>

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page 3/3