

# Bonner Querschnitte

*Bonn Profiles – Press Reports*

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## **BQ 333 – No. 47/2014**

### **My Experience as a Representative for the World Evangelical Alliance at the 2013 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan**

**A Commentary by Thomas Schirmmacher**

(Bonn, 16.12.2014)

#### **Cooperation**

Efforts made by the World Council of Churches to respond to the Evangelical movement in a non-adversarial and friendly manner, to inquire about point of views on all issues, and to include them were all blatantly obvious at the General Assembly in Busan. This attitude was also expressed by the fact that representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) were able to contribute to various commissions and, where appropriate, presented the WEA's reservations in an unobstructed manner:

Thus, Rolf Hille was a member of the Program Committee for Busan as WEA representative. A member of the WEA Mission Commission is also a member of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). For my part, I was called to be a member of the Public Issues Committee, which compiled the General Assembly's declarations. From there, I was placed as the chairman of the committee which drafted a declaration against religious violence and for religious freedom. The declaration also included draft wording against the persecution of Christians and was later adopted by the General Assembly.

It was impressive just how cordially we were welcomed in Busan and how much space we received to present our mutual viewpoints as well as our divergent



Plenary speech by Thomas Schirmmacher



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positions. Through a number of workshops, short presentations in workshops, the many remarks we expressed, and work together on commissions, we were completely free to introduce our view of things. This mostly occurred with the broad agreement of the delegates and member churches of the WCC. We even had two events in the official program where our WEA representatives were able to discuss among themselves and plan their positioning. In addition to that, vast floor space was placed at the disposal of the International Institute for Religious Freedom in the exhibition in Busan. The site was busily frequented, and every day Joseph Yakubu and Christof Sauer spent 10 hours at the stand speaking with what totaled over 1,000 delegates.

The WEA made it clear that it is thankful to the World Council of Churches for its outstretched hand, which is making it possible to introduce our view on all items. It sees that our cooperation in the Global Christian Forum, in the Conference of the Secretaries of Christian World Communions, in the five-year process which led to a joint document from the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the WEA entitled "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World," and in joint undertakings for human rights is bearing fruit.

As the chairman of the sub-committee on religious violence and religious freedom, I was able to observe the development of the General Assembly's declaration against religious violence from close range, above all in cooperation with Oriental bishops from the Islamic world. It became very clear that the WEA's efforts in the cause of persecuted churches is changing ecumenical relationships and is serving to bring us Evangelicals together with member churches of the WCC who used to lie outside of our sphere of interest. The fact that in the year ended I met with numerous Patriarchs of Eastern churches, along with the Coptic Pope (as well as with the head of most global Evangelical groups, quite a few cardinals, and the Pope), is all in line with this. The many positive reactions to my plenary address in Busan (in consent with our Secretary General Geoff Tunnicliffe) demonstrate to me the shifts taking place in the global denominational church landscape. These shifts are the biggest we have seen for over one-half a century.

## Missions Paper

In the final analysis, the texts adopted at the General Assembly are without exception unobjectionable and supportable.

The World Council of Church's mission paper and, more specifically, its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) document entitled *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, was already adopted on September 5, 2012 by the Central Committee of the WCC one year prior to the General Assembly. It was vehemently criticized by some of Evangelicals in Germany. But we find that our view of missions is expressed in a number of the paragraphs co-formulated by the WEA and Evangelical theologians on the verbal transmission of the gospel. This is the case even if, in addition to that, the long document lists many correct goals for our activities which we indeed principally share but would not have necessarily mentioned in connection with the keyword 'missions.' Rather, we would have cited them as generally that which is just and good for the world. These goals

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correspond to long stretches of the Capetown Declaration which was co-drafted by the Lausanne's Movement theological Working Group and the Theological Commission of the WEA. It is regrettable that the plenary assembly on missions and on the missions paper only emphasized certain aspects of the paper and not the holistic approach. Remarks made by a Catholic speaker that the Holy Spirit is the origin of all religions, was, however, not representative, and reactions demonstrated this. That the speaker referred to Pope Benedict XVI of all people as proof for this had a certain comic element.

### Syncretism

It was striking that elements of the World Council of Churches' General Assembly traditionally viewed critically by Evangelicals or Orthodox churches were practically completely missing this time. Thus, there were no non-Christian religious ceremonies which took place during the official program. In the plenary events, there was not a single time when – as commonly used to be the case before 1990 – ceremonies of other religions were performed. There were only scattered brief words of greeting from representatives of other religions. Only the Jewish representative spoke somewhat longer, but the Jewish faith is closer to us anyway.

### Homosexuality

It is apparent that the World Council of Churches is increasingly silent on some moral topics which are intensively disputed among churches. Thus, the topic of homosexuality, which on a global scale is highly dangerous for ecumenical relationships, practically did not arise, apart from the clear statement by the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Hilarion in front of the closed business session and apart from a number of stands in the exhibition. That in spite of repeated inquiries the World Council of Churches and its leadership refused to give any positive opinion on homosexuality irritated many of the member churches and lobbying groups which had traveled there. Despite this, all leaders successfully stayed the course.



Press conference of the WEA in Busan, on the pulpit the director of the CWME of the WCC

### Demonstrators

The WEA consciously distanced itself from the bold actions and statements made by a number of extreme Evangelical groups outside of the General Assembly and

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conducted discussions with the World Council of Churches in direct talks and not via the media.

The WEA consciously distanced itself from the bold actions and statements made by a number of extreme Evangelical groups outside of the General Assembly and conducted discussions with the World Council of Churches in direct talks and not via the media.

The three main content-based charges made from the side of the demonstrators were without consequence.

1. The charge of syncretism made against the WCC by demonstrators was rebutted by the General Assembly itself. As has been said, there was not a single time in the official program and above all in the plenary events that ceremonies of other religions were conducted as had earlier been commonplace. This and many another clear improvements might be mentioned.
2. The charge relating to publicly speaking up for homosexuality, – as we have seen – also does not correspond to reality. The demonstrators had to have known that there are churches belonging to the World Council of Churches which argue the case for homosexuality as well as member churches – for instance, Orthodox and Evangelical – which hold homosexuality to be incompatible with the will of God.
3. The charge made against the WCC that communism is promoted and defended and the charge of control by communist countries and secret services comes from the time of the Cold War. The Cold War is something which continues in Korea but has nothing to do with the WCC of the present.

### Downloads:

- Plenary speech by Thomas Schirrmacher ([doc](#))
- [Photo 1](#): Plenary speech by Thomas Schirrmacher
- [Photo 2](#): Plenary speech by Thomas Schirrmacher
- [Photo 3](#): Press conference of the WEA in Busan, on the pulpit the director of the CWME of the WCC
- [Photo 4](#): After the plenary speech, 3rd from left Cardinal Koch

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