

WEA at inter-faith summit on religious freedom

Twenty-five Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders met at the Vatican in January to discuss the problem of religiously motivated conflict and persecution. Thomas K. Johnson, senior advisor to the WEA Theological Commission, was among them. The meeting was called by the Multi-Faith Neighbors Network and the US State Department Office of International Religious Freedom.

Sam Brownback, US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, stated in an interview with Religious News Service, 'I think the world is crying for this movement', adding that even though the world might not want to talk about religion, the matter cannot be ignored. 'If we'd involved the religious actors 30 years ago in the Middle East peace negotiations and discussions, saying "Okay, this is what we are thinking about, what do you think? Help us build the peace", we might be somewhere today', he said. 'We still don't have peace in the Middle East and the prospects don't look particularly good.'

The meeting and following efforts envision multi-faith interventions wherever religions are contributing to hostility and violence, rather than contributing to the well-being of peoples and communities. In particular, the participants committed themselves to two goals:

(1) To focus such efforts towards those wracked by conflicts and carnage, where possible, by sending teams to one or two areas not yet served by multi-faith efforts to help spur and guide towards peace;

(2) To advocate before our political and civic leaders to use these values of religious freedom, civic equality, and societal change of differences as a foundation of laws, policies, and civic norms.



Participants at the January summit on religious freedom. The WEA's Thomas K. Johnson is the second person to the right of Pope Francis. © Thomas K. Johnson

Johnson commented after the meeting, 'The reduction of religious persecution and religiously motivated violence is dependent on the results of a global re-think of the relations between religious communities and nation-states. Until a century or less ago, our Christian churches inadvertently contributed to terrible wars, such as World War I, by the way in which the churches related to the major powers. In the horrendous battles of that war, most of the soldiers on both sides thought they were fighting for God against godless enemies, not knowing they could have recited the Lord's Prayer together with the soldiers they were killing. Afterwards Christians slowly reconsidered everything regarding church-state relations.

'This group could play a vital role in leading this sort of re-think on a global level within and between religions, especially where there are tensions and violence. Protection of robustly defined freedom of religion is crucial, since this protection brings the expectation that people of various religions can be good citizens in the same nation and that another religion or nation is not an embodiment of evil. In order for this to become a reality, support for freedom of religion must come from the leaders of all the religious communities.'

Evangelical Review of Theology **now available free to online subscribers**

The WEA's quarterly *Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT), now in its 44th year, will become a free electronic publication beginning with its August 2020 edition. ERT hopes to greatly broaden its audience and make a significant contribution to global Christian discourse by publishing high-quality articles for a general readership on topics of contemporary relevance.

Among the WEA-associated authors anticipated in the August issue are:

- Associate Secretary General Thomas Schirmacher
- Bambang Budijanto, head of the Asia Evangelical Alliance and founder of the Bilangan Research Center (Indonesia's parallel to the Barna Research Group in the US)
- Senior theological advisor Thomas K. Johnson, who is leading a collaborative effort between evangelicals and humanitarian Muslims to counter radical elements of both Islam and secularism
- Brian Grim, president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation
- Chris Elisara, head of the WEA's Creation Care Task Force

To become a subscriber, send an e-mail to ERT and *Theological News* editor Bruce Barron at bruce.barron0@gmail.com with 'ERT subscription' in the subject line, giving your name, e-mail address, country and (optional) institution. Article submissions or suggestions are also welcome. We encourage you to invite colleagues in your networks to subscribe as well. Contact Bruce for more information or an e-mail invitation to share.

Theological Commission statement on COVID-19

*The WEA Theological Commission has released the following statement
on our responsibility amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic.*

COVID-19 has presented the world with its most all-encompassing crisis in 75 years. But Christians are uniquely equipped to shine in crises. The World Evangelical Alliance urges believers in Christ everywhere to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess and be emissaries of God's love to those in physical, emotional, and spiritual need.

At a time when a spreading virus threatens millions of people, we can affirm and protect life—by praying for the sick, those caring for the sick, and researchers working to develop a vaccine; by supporting healthcare providers as appropriate with our time and resources; and by observing the protective measures recommended by government leaders and medical experts.

At a time when public health imperatives prevent our normal practice of meeting together, we can reach out to isolated neighbors, implement creative ways to provide spiritual nurture, continue to 'assemble' online or by other forms of communication, and prepare a continuity plan to serve our congregations and our communities effectively. We can also deepen our appreciation of and commitment to the millions of believers who can never meet openly due to the threat of persecution.

At a time when many are fearful about their future, we should combine prudence with fearless trust in a trustworthy God—thoroughly respecting public health guidelines, offering our resources to others rather than hoarding them, and supporting businesses at economic risk.

At a time when the suspension of entertainment, travel, and other diversions may induce boredom and depression in many, we can demonstrate that we have tasted the kindness and joy of the Lord and point to our indestructible source of purpose, hope, and meaning.

At a time when many ask the perennial question, 'How could God permit ... ?' we can reaffirm the core message of the Christian faith: that God sent his Son to live in solidarity with our sufferings and to endure worse things than we will ever suffer so that we may have a lasting hope for an eternal kingdom.

Most of all, by living in uninterrupted hope, joy, and sacrificial love, we can show that Jesus is alive, that circumstances do not change our trust in a sovereign God, and that God's love can transform others as it has transformed us.

Documents from June 2019 WCC Faith and Order meeting now available



The Faith and Order Commission of WCC meeting in Nanjing © M. Xanthi/WCC

The minutes of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission's meeting of 13–19 June 2019 in Nanjing, China are now available. Thomas Schirmmacher, a consultant to the Commission, commented, 'Everybody concerned about the future of ecumenical relations should especially follow the papers of the study groups, which map the growing friction on moral issues between and within churches around the globe and try to find ways to discuss the relevant topics in peaceful dialogue.' Two reports from the meeting and information on how to order a free copy of the full document are available at: [Documents of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order](#).

High-level diplomacy in Kazakhstan

On a February trip to Kazakhstan—a country where Christians are tolerated but still tightly controlled—Thomas Schirmmacher, WEA Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns, engaged in high-level diplomacy with intra-faith, inter-faith and government representatives.

Schirmmacher received reports on the religious situation in Kazakhstan from the WEA's national alliance there and from the Federation of Pentecostal Churches of Kazakhstan. He then met with two top Catholic leaders: Archbishop Tomasz Peta, President of the Kazakh Catholic Bishops' Conference, and the Apostolic Nuncio in Kazakhstan, Archbishop Francis Assisi Chullikatt. He asked the Catholic Church, which is officially recognized though strictly controlled in Kazakhstan, to stand up for the rights of religious minorities in that country.

Foreign Christians are allowed to visit Christians and churches in Kazakhstan, but are not allowed to preach or perform religious ceremonies without a permit.

In addition, Schirmmacher met the Grand Mufti of Kazakhstan, Serikbay Oraz, during a conference in the city of Baku. 'Kazakhstan is a Muslim country, but not an Islamic state', Oraz stated, noting that Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia that does not assign Islam a special role in its constitution.

Schirmmacher subsequently travelled to the capital city of Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), where he met with the deputy mayor.



Thomas Schirmmacher with the Grand Mufti of Kazakhstan, Serikbay Oraz.
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Schirmachers address Christian-Muslim issues in Southeast Asia, Australia

On trips to the Philippines, Australia and Malaysia, WEA Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns Thomas Schirmacher and his wife, professor of Islamic studies Christine Schirmacher, addressed sensitive issues of Christian-Muslim relations.

In the **Philippines**, both Schirmachers spoke at PTS College and Advanced Studies (formerly Presbyterian Theological Seminary) in Manila on how the school's curriculum could address Islam more fully.

Christine Schirmacher explained that well-educated youth are increasingly unresponsive to the propaganda of Islamist movements and dissatisfied with the inadequate infrastructure and education provided by strict Islamic regimes in the Middle East. Since the failure (except in Tunisia) of the Arab Spring uprisings, many young people no longer believe that things can improve in their home countries and are seeking to emigrate, often by applying for scholarships at universities in the more moderate United Arab Emirates or in the West.

Thomas Schirmacher discussed how a Reformed approach to education can incorporate attention to Islam. Also, the Schirmachers met with the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches.

In **Australia**, Christine Schirmacher delivered a guest lecture on the topic of religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries for the professors of the faculty of the Asian Institute of the University of Melbourne.

Schirmacher argued that the future of Islamic cultures will depend on whether they will listen to the voices of Islamic intellectuals who support religious freedom within the context of Islam. 'A religion which is coercing its people to belief is going to die out in our globalized world', she said.

At the University of Melbourne, Schirmacher interfaced with one of the most compelling voices for religious freedom within Islam: Abdullah Saeed, chair of the National Centre for Contemporary Islamic Studies (NCCIS), which is part of the Asian Institute.

While in Kuala Lumpur, **Malaysia** for a leadership meeting of the Global Christian Forum, the Schirmachers met with 20 leading evangelical experts on dialogue with Muslims to discuss the WEA's activities in this regard. The meeting took place at Damara Utrama Methodist Church, the largest Methodist congregation in Malaysia.

The Schirmachers also presented a guest lecture on 'Christian-Muslim Relations in an Age of Political Conflict and Migration' at St Paul's Theological College in Kuala Lumpur. St Paul's belongs to the Asia Theological Association, the Asian branch of the WEA Theological Commission.



Christine and Thomas Schirmacher with the management of PTS College and Advanced Studies, Manila. © BQ/Thomas Schirmacher



Christian and Thomas Schirmacher meet with Abdullah Saeed of the University of Melbourne. © BQ/Thomas Schirmacher



Among the Schirmachers' hosts in Malaysia were Dr. Prince Guneratnam (far left), chairman of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and Bishop Dr. Daniel Ho, pastor of Damara Utrama Methodist Church. © BQ/Thomas Schirmacher

WEA initiates ethics, religious freedom collaboration with world's largest Muslim group

Representatives of the WEA Department of Theological Concerns have established a joint working group with leading figures in the world's largest Muslim organization in an effort to reshape how the world thinks about religion and to counter extremist impulses.

The Muslim participants, advocates of what they call 'Humanitarian Islam', are members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an Indonesian-based organization with an estimated 90 million follows. Since its founding almost a century ago, NU has gained wide recognition for its promotion of a version of Muslim orthodoxy characterized by respect for pluralism and freedom of religion. It has members in most major cities around the globe.

WEA representatives met with a group of NU leaders—including Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the NU Supreme Council—last November in Indonesia to plan their collaboration.

In 2018, NU's youth organization, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, released the Nusantara Manifesto, which argues that radical Islam is devoted to an outmoded 12th-century version of shari'a (Islamic law) that does not correlate with the realities of today's pluralistic, globalized society and therefore does not provide reliable moral guidance for our time.

Thomas K. Johnson, senior advisor for theology and religious freedom, will lead the WEA contingent. Other members are Christine Schirmacher, professor of Islamic studies at the University of Bonn, and Kyle Wisdom, a PhD candidate at the University of Sussex who is currently researching Indonesian forms of Islam. Paul Marshall, distinguished professor of religious freedom at Baylor University and a fellow at the Hudson Institute who specializes in Indonesia, will play an advisory role.



Nahdlatul Ulama and WEA participants during their discussion period.
© Kyle Wisdom



A group photo from the meeting of Nahdlatul Ulama and WEA leaders. Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the NU Supreme Council, is in the centre; C. Holland Taylor, head of the LibForAll Foundation and an important contributor to NU's public philosophy, is at the far right. WEA representatives (left to right) are global ambassador Brian Stiller, Christine and Thomas Schirmacher, and Thomas K. Johnson. The painting depicts a Muslim independence fighter carrying the body of a dead Christian fighter during the battle for independence from the Dutch. It is intended to represent Indonesia's history of cooperation between Muslims and Christians. © Kyle Wisdom

In a report on NU's writings and philosophy, Johnson made the following observations regarding the importance of the proposed NU-WEA collaboration:

Rather than being on opposing sides in a potential clash of civilizations, Evangelical Christians and Humanitarian Muslims should help to protect each other's religious communities and to articulate and embody a global moral compass.

In our situation in which many thoughtful observers have worried about a clash between Christian and Muslim civilizations leading to a third world war, seeing each act of aggression between Muslims and Christians as a step in this direction, there can be tremendous gain by simply telling the world that a major Christian body and a major Muslim body are at peace with each other. This is not the peace of shared religious beliefs; it is the peace of compatible approaches to life in society.

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Though we may always understand God and relate to God in very different ways, Humanitarian Muslims and Evangelical Christians see life, family, rationality, faith community, and an orderly social-economic life as fundamental human goods that lead to comprehensive well-being in this world. We know these deep human goods are vulnerable, needing protection from various threats. We have similar convictions regarding universal moral standards that should influence religious and legal norms, all of which should protect basic human goods. This must be demonstrated intellectually, politically, in education, and in shared humanitarian efforts.

European Academy of Religion to hold panel on 'Theology and Scripture'

by Michael Borowski

Should US American evangelicals vote for Trump? Should German evangelicals allow drums for their Sunday morning worship? Should Tanzanian evangelicals accept female pastors? Should anyone use Apple Pay?

This set of questions reminds us that most pressing issues for evangelicals vary widely across the globe. But an overall problem is that we have difficulty even finding a proper way to debate questions of faith and their implications, let alone find answers.

One frequently suggested solution is that we should 'agree to disagree'. Interestingly, this notion may actually be quite evangelical in its origin, as it is accredited to George Whitefield. And in fact, evangelicalism seems to have tried to focus on what is really important, while letting things of secondary importance lay on the sidelines. However, what may have worked in John Wesley's day does not appear to work so well today. I would suggest that evangelicals have quite often trouble recognizing what is really important, that we pick the wrong battles as a result, and that we are often woefully ill-equipped to fight these battles. The outcome has been described as biblical anarchism, leading to ongoing splits within the church. Other solutions—such as a new fundamentalism, a new liberalism, or simple ignorance of the problem—are hardly convincing.

What we need is a closer look at how to make theological proposals from Scripture, for the underlying method of presenting our proposals seems to be a central source of the difficulty. Christianity, as a whole, is closely related to the Bible. But how have the Scriptures been received theologically through the centuries? How can biblical studies and systematic theology interact in fruitful ways to support 21st-century Christian faith? What is the theological status of the Bible? And how can we use this information to make theological proposals today that are faithful to Scripture (and thereby to God) and also connect with both the church and the societies we live in?

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David Parker

‘Discerning the Obedience of Faith’

A Short History of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission



1969-1986 1986-1989 1990-1996 1996-2006 1998-2001 2007-2009 2010 2010-



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The history of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance by David Parker is available as a free download [here](https://www.bucer.de/ressourcen/wea-cd.html). More resources can be found at <https://www.bucer.de/ressourcen/wea-cd.html>.

(Borowski, continued) These are some of the leading questions for a study group on ‘Scripture and Theology’, which convened as part of the annual meeting of the European Academy of Religion (EAR) in 2019. In 2020, the study group will again bring together scholars from various countries and denominations at the EAR annual meeting, where we continue to aim at a critical-constructive dialogue on how to be responsible practitioners of theology.

The program committee includes Nikolaos Asproulis (Volos Academy for Theological Studies), Gijsbert van den Brink (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Hans Burger (Theologische Universiteit Kampen), Mark Elliott (University of Glasgow), Arnold Huijgen (Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn), John Milbank (University of Nottingham) and Thomas Söding (Ruhr University Bochum). I (affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) am a co-chair along with Tomas Bokedal (NLA Bergen and University of Aberdeen) and Ludger Jansen (University of Rostock and University of Passau). We have scheduled 26 presentations over two days, to be delivered by theologians from various contexts and more than a dozen countries.

We encourage evangelical theologians to participate in these discussions, currently scheduled for 23–24 June in Bologna, Italy, and to contribute presentation proposals for future years. Papers will be published annually. For more information, see <https://scriptureandtheology.home.blog>.

WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

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The Department can be contacted at Friedrichstrasse 38, 53111 Bonn, Germany, fax +49 228 9650389.

Editor: Bruce Barron (bruce.barron0@gmail.com).

Publisher: Thomas Schirmacher.

Editorial Team: Rosalee Velloso Ewell, James Nkansah-Obrempong, Thomas K. Johnson, Martin Warnecke, Peirong Lin, Johannes Otto.

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