

Schirmmacher to be next WEA Secretary General

On 29 October, the World Evangelical Alliance's International Council announced the appointment of Thomas Schirmmacher, currently Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns, to become Secretary General as of 1 March 2021.

Schirmmacher will replace Bishop Efraim Tendaro of the Philippines, who has served as Secretary General for five years.

Tendaro described Schirmmacher as 'the person who is best prepared to lead the global body of evangelicals into the future. As we have partnered together in the WEA Senior Leadership Team for several years, I saw in him the charisma, competence and capacity that is matched by the character, conviction and calling from God that are needed for such a global task. I have full confidence that he will lead the WEA as empowered by the Holy Spirit in advancing the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ to all nations, and effecting personal, family and community transformation for the glory of God.'

Schirmmacher has filled various roles for the WEA since 1999. He has been a member of its Religious Liberty Commission, developed the International Institute for Religions Freedom, built up the WEA's Office for Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations, and currently chairs the WEA's Theological Commission and is Ambassador for Human Rights.



Thomas Schirmmacher in a plenary at the Global Christian Forum in Bogota, Colombia, 2019 © BQ/Martin Warnecke

Schirmmacher and his wife, Christine (a professor of Islamic studies at the Universities of Bonn and Leuven and the WEA's Commissioner for Islamic Affairs) have collaborated to enhance the WEA's profile and impact in Muslim nations.

In an [interview](#) with the *Christian Post* following his selection, Schirmmacher identified biblical illiteracy as the biggest problem facing the global evangelical movement today. 'Bible knowledge is fading away,' he said. 'This is the utmost problem we have beyond all theological differences, financial problems, and political questions.'

On one hand, Schirmmacher noted that in the Western world, children of evangelical families 'are not really rooted in the Bible' and many of them leave the faith. On the other hand, in areas of the world where Christianity is growing rapidly, young believers 'only know about the Bible what they learned from their conversion' yet are often tasked with leading churches due to the lack of experienced, trained leadership. 'The result', Schirmmacher explained, 'is that people know much less and are more much more open to secularism and strange things like the health and wealth gospel.'

In the *Christian Post* interview, Schirmmacher also highlighted the importance of reinforcing a sense of evangelical unity so as to counter the 'constant splitting of churches' within the movement. 'We need to invest a lot of time into theology again, not to revive denominationalism, but to revive that the alternative is not just nothing', he indicated.

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In the Gambia, interreligious dialogue overcomes extremist tendencies

On 22 September 2020, the Parliament of the Gambia declined to accept the draft of a new constitution, concluding—at least for now—an extended battle against efforts to enshrine an extremist understanding of law in this heavily Muslim but historically tolerant nation.

The Gambian Christian Council campaigned against the draft for one year, with Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals and Evangelicals working together to ensure that the Gambia would continue to protect the religious rights of Christians. Moreover, the Council's campaign team effectively engaged Muslim leaders, leading to the creation of an interreligious faith group which eventually achieved two unprecedented outcomes. The first was a joint communiqué to the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC), which provided suggestions with regard to the use of two contentious terms, 'secular' (which many Muslims interpret as meaning 'without morals') and 'shari'ah'. The second was a national interreligious platform called 'Sunu Reew' (Our Country) through which Christians and Muslims have worked together to address not only divisive issues related to the proposed constitution, but also the COVID-19 pandemic and civic education.



Thomas Schirmacher speaks during a discussion with the National Human Rights Commission of the Gambia. Below him (in blue and red) is James Allen Yaw Odico, Anglican Bishop and chair of the Gambia Christian Council. © BQ/Martin Warnecke

Thomas and Christine Schirmacher, representing the WEA, were invited to the Gambia in March to help with the bridge-building and advocacy efforts. They received a friendly reception from Muslim leaders who were already aware of the WEA's partnership with the Indonesia-based Humanitarian Islam movement to counter Islamic extremism. As a result, the Schirmachers enjoyed instant credibility as inter-faith leaders.



Begay Jabang, the accountant who ably led the Gambia Christian Council campaign team that advocated for changes in the draft constitution. © BQ/Martin Warnecke

Thomas Schirmacher considered the timing of their trip providential. He and Christine arrived on the last flight to leave Germany before COVID-19 restrictions shut down airports, and they departed in late March on the last international flight back to Germany. By then (on 23 March), the inter-faith working group had submitted recommendations to the CRC, suggesting that the constitution describe the Gambia as a 'God-fearing nation' and state clearly that any use of shari'ah would apply only to Muslims.

Looking back on the engagement, Schirmacher stated, 'On the Christian side it paid off, that the Catholic Church, all Protestant churches and the Evangelical Alliance of the Gambia worked together and together built bridges to the

Muslim community of good will. They all would have lost together, if tendencies towards an Islamic state would have prevailed.'

WEA's Johnson a speaker at global peacemaking discussion

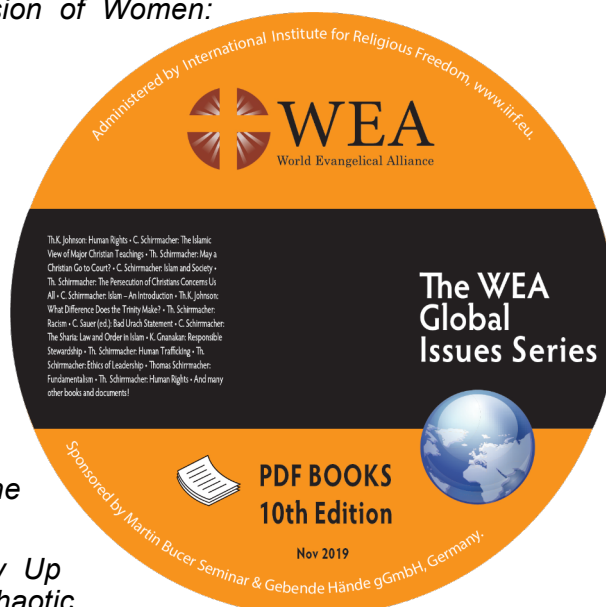
Thomas K. Johnson, senior advisor to the WEA Theological Commission, was among the speakers at a two-day conference of the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative, an invitation-only group of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders working to put an end to inter-religious conflict. The event took place on 1 and 3 December and was hosted by the US State Department.

Johnson's topic was 'Religious Communities as Good Neighbors in a Post-secular Global Society'. He appeared on a panel along with His Eminence Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah, an expert on Islamic jurisprudence and president of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, and Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles.

Six new WEA books available

The WEA Department of Theological Concerns has released six new books. The first two listed below are part of the WEA Global Issues Series and the other four add to the World of Theology series. All six can be downloaded here: <https://www.bucer.de/ressourcen/wea-cd.html>

- Christine and Thomas Schirmacher, *The Oppression of Women: Violence—Exploitation—Poverty*
- Christine Schirmacher, *Islam and Democracy: Can They Be Reconciled?*
- Peter Lawrence, *Fellow Travellers: A Comparative Study on the Identity Formation of Jesus Followers from Jewish, Christian and Muslim Backgrounds in the Holy Land*
- William Wagner, *From Classroom Dummy to University President: Serving God in the Land of Sound of Music*
- Thomas K. Johnson, David Parker and Thomas Schirmacher (eds.), *In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Teaching the Trinity from the Creeds to Modern Discussion*
- Mark Wagner and William Wagner (eds.), *Halfway Up the Mountain: Restoring God's Purpose in this Chaotic World*



JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT FOR THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Evangelical Review of Theology (quarterly)
<http://www.worldevangelicals.org/tc/>

Islam and Christianity (English and German) (semiannual)
<https://www.islaminstitut.de/en/category/publikationen/journal/>

Jahrbuch für Verfolgung und Diskriminierung von Christen
 [Yearbook on Persecution and Discrimination of Christians]
 (German) <https://www.iirf.eu/journal-books/german-yearbooks/>

International Journal of Religious Freedom (semiannual)
<https://www.iirf.eu/journal-books/iirf-journal/>

Jahrbuch für Religionsfreiheit [Yearbook on Religious Freedom]
 (German) <https://www.iirf.eu/journal-books/german-yearbooks/>

DIGITAL ONLY:

Theological News (quarterly)
<http://www.worldevangelicals.org/tc/publications/TN.htm>

Bonn Profiles (twice a week)
<https://www.bucer.org/resources/bonner-querschnitte.html>

WEA RLC Religious Liberty Prayer News (monthly)
<https://worldea.org/whoweare/newsletter-signup>

Business & Ministry News (Business Coalition) (monthly)
 order from business@worldea.org

Bonner Querschnitte (twice a week) (German)
<https://www.bucer.de/ressourcen/bonner-querschnitte.html>

WEA RLC Research and Analysis Report (periodic)
<https://worldea.org/whoweare/newsletter-signup>

WEA theologian addresses ‘Christian nationalism’

Thomas K. Johnson, the WEA’s senior theological advisor, returned to his native United States in 2019 after spending most of his career teaching in Europe. When supporters of Donald Trump rioted at the US Capitol on 6 January, Johnson was alarmed by the evidence of Christian participation and felt he should draw on his theological knowledge to providing a better approach to Christian engagement with government. The result was this essay, which appeared at [Religion Unplugged](#), a nonprofit website that seeks to improve media coverage of religion, on 13 January.

The views expressed here are Thomas’ personal opinions and do not reflect official positions of the WEA.

The Capitol riot of Jan. 6 has both added urgency to and reshaped the discourse on how to heal our deep national divisions. Now, along with white supremacists, conspiracy theorists, Trump and Antifa, fingers are being pointed at ‘Christian nationalism’.

That concept is not clearly defined. But since President Trump’s defeat in the November election, it has certainly been rearing its head—most notably in the ‘Jericho marches’ on Washington, D.C.

The best [one-line definition](#) of Christian nationalism I have seen is ‘the identification of a nation-state, race or political party and its candidates with the Christian faith or church in such a way that the two identities are equated’. The adherents of Christian nationalism seem to believe that they have a special connection to God, that America has a special role in God’s plan and that they and their allies (particularly Donald Trump) should be running the country.

Many of them, as [David French](#) has documented, have based their sense of urgency on a belief that Democratic control of the federal government will mean the end of America as we know it. Some—especially those who prophesied a Trump reelection—have maintained hope that God would somehow miraculously reverse the results between Election Day and Inauguration Day.

The vast majority of evangelical and other politically conservative Christians have responded in much calmer fashion, reminding their followers that God still knows what he is doing and encouraging them to be good citizens under a Biden administration. Baptist pastor [Robert Jeffress](#), one of the most prominent evangelical Trump backers, is a good example.

But others have been unwilling to abandon their cherished hope in the face of reality. Instead, they have latched onto anything available to reassure them that their perception of God’s will—in this case, their conviction that God would keep Trump in the White House—was not mistaken. Some have even chosen to try to help bring that result to pass—attending ‘Save America’ rallies or even storming the Capitol.

As a theologian for the world’s largest evangelical organization, I feel an obligation to offer a better way forward for Christians, so that they can contribute toward our nation’s healing, guide their confused and worried neighbors away from the excesses of Christian nationalism and represent Christianity in a more positive fashion that furthers the common good.

What I offer is hardly original. It starts with Jesus and the apostle Paul.

According to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus encouraged people to ‘give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ In that statement, Jesus distinguished between two realms: the kingdom of God, to which his followers owe their ultimate allegiance, and human kingdoms, to which we owe obedience unless their requirements are in direct conflict with our allegiance to God.

This distinction is reinforced in two other New Testament passages: Romans 13, where Paul describes governing authorities as established by God, and 1 Peter 2.

Throughout history, the Christian church has generally recognized this distinction. There have been glaring exceptions, such as the Inquisition, the religious wars in Europe after the Protestant Reformation and Roger Williams getting expelled from Puritan Massachusetts for promoting religious freedom. But usually, Christians have recognized that the church and the state should function in quite different ways.

The church has authority over believers, but the state serves and has authority over everyone. The church addresses divine matters, but the state deals with public order and temporal affairs. To be members of the church, people must agree to obey God and the Bible; in the realm of the state, all people have equal rights regardless of their religious beliefs.

How does this distinction guide Christians in their involvement with the state? The answer is, in several ways, all of which contradict the dangerous impulses currently associated with Christian nationalism.

First, because the state must serve everyone, Christians should never seek to have the government privilege one religious group over another. The state must serve adherents of other religions (or of none) as full stakeholders in America.

Second, we must recognize what theologians call common grace—the fact that God gives good ideas to all people, not only Christians. Just as Christian dentists are not always better than non-Christian dentists, so Christians—or the people whom Christians select—will not necessarily govern better than others.

Many Americans today are dealing with buyer's remorse because they supported leaders based on ideology to the exclusion of character, integrity and basic competence. I do not disrespect those who believed, prior to Nov. 3, that of the only two viable choices, Donald Trump was the better option on balance. But what we have seen since Nov. 3 should cause all of us, especially Christians, to reexamine our evaluation criteria.

Third, our advocacy in the public square should not pretend everyone believes the Bible, and it is inappropriate to use politics to impose such a pretense on our neighbors. Instead, we must appeal to them on the basis of principles that apply to everyone—what we call the natural moral law.

All people regularly appeal to the natural moral law, even if they do not realize it. When protesters say that 'Black lives matter', they are not saying, 'Black lives matter to me, but it's okay if they don't matter to you.' Rather, they probably mean, 'We all know that Black people are of equal value to other people and we want our government to recognize this.' In other words, they are appealing to a universal standard that everyone understands and can be asked to follow.

Many of our most intense debates involve areas where we disagree on what the moral law says. We all agree that enslaving or murdering people is wrong, and that people should be prevented from doing these things, by force if necessary. We may disagree as to whether abortion should be classified as murder. But if we think that others have a deficient understanding of the moral law, we must engage with them through persuasion and democratic processes, not threats or violence.

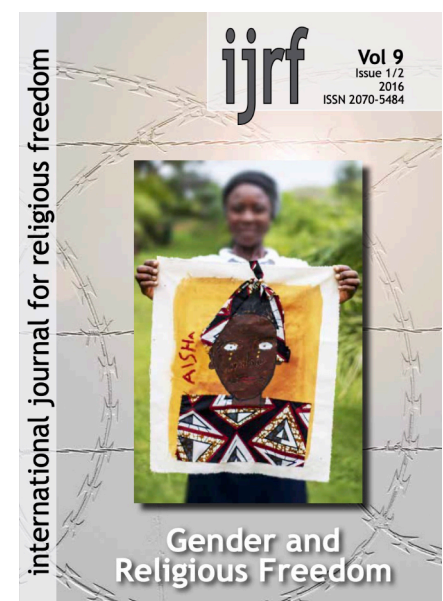
When we emphasize these three points—serving all people equally, common grace and the natural moral law—our advocacy is characterized by humility, mutual respect, and greater openness to discussion, rather than by triumphalist claims to moral superiority.

If our churches will differentiate properly between the realms of church and state as I have outlined, using the appropriate form of reason for each, they will make an invaluable contribution toward restoring our nation and healing many individual souls.

WEA's Peirong Lin contributes to religious freedom journal

The *International Journal for Religious Freedom* (IJRF) resumed publication last year after a five-year hiatus. Because it is catching up for missed years, the new issues are dated 2015 and 2016, but they contain articles on more recent events.

Peirong Lin of the WEA Theological Commission served as guest editor for the newly released 2016 edition, which focused on issues of gender and religious freedom. The eight papers contained in this issue highlight a variety of frequently overlooked ways in which women face double vulnerability due to their faith and their gender. All IJRF issues are available on the journal's website: <http://journal.iirf.eu/>



Racism can be reflected in the leadership structure of churches

During the December 2020 meeting of the *The Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe (CECE)*, The Reverend Stephen McPeck, chair of a task force on 'Racism, Reconciliation, and Beloved Community', presented a report and survey on racism in Europe. As part of the meeting, the CECE interviewed three experts on racism: UK Anglican priest Yejide Peters; Michaël Privot, director of the European Network Against Racism; and Thomas Schirmmacher of the WEA.

In his comments, Schirmmacher described racism as more than just a societal evil that might be suppressed purely through law and state power. 'It is sin', he said, 'a dark and deep motivation coming from deep in our heart, with which we often have become so acquainted that we do not even realise it'.

In light of the first appointment of an Afro-American Catholic cardinal from the USA, Schirmmacher observed that very often the top leadership of churches and global Christian communions does not reflect the racial composition of its churches. In India, for example, dozens of Dalit congregations wrote to Pope Francis, indicating that they would leave the Catholic Church if he did not appoint a considerable number of Dalits as bishops.

'Racism', Schirmmacher said, 'is not just everyday discrimination, but is deeply built into power structures and financial structures. The church of Jesus Christ should prove that such feelings and prejudices have been overcome through reconciliation in Jesus Christ.'

Alfred Neufeld (1955–2020): visionary Mennonite thinker and bridge builder

by Thomas Schirmmacher

Alfred Neufeld, my first doctoral student, friend, companion and spiritual role model, died on 24 June 2020 in a hospital in Münster, Germany. He combined his Mennonite heritage, his Global South upbringing, first-rate academic work, deep commitment to mission, and ecumenical spirit to become one of the most productive Christian servants I have known.

Alfred grew up in a village of Mennonites of German origin who had emigrated to the Gran Chaco, a bushy savanna region of Paraguay. He worked for two years as a primary school teacher among the indigenous Paraguayans. It would be impossible to understand Alfred's later global life and work without this early history of a double connection with minorities—that is, both Mennonites and indigenous peoples.

Alfred completed his doctorate from 1992 to 1994 at my own alma mater, the Freie Evangelische Theologische Akademie Basel, now STH Basel. During those years I was teaching mission and religious studies and later ethics at the school. In connection with the topic of his dissertation, he then also studied ethnology, economic policy and Latin American literature at the same time. To me, missiology was unthinkable without ethnology or related knowledge, and Alfred followed in this path.



Alfred Neufeld (center) receiving his doctorate in Geneva on 1 December 1994. Doctoral supervisor Thomas Schirmmacher is above him. © Th. Schirmmacher

Alfred received his doctorate in 1994. In an unforgettable discussion, he brilliantly defended his work to professors who, without exception, had no idea of how to teach biblical theology in a non-Western culture, and who partly suspected Alfred of wanting to soften the standards of the great councils of Christianity through his criticism of the Mennonite mission in Paraguay. Alfred, however, rightly insisted that the native peoples of Paraguay and all peoples of the world should develop their theology directly from the Bible, not by way of learning two thousand years of church history

in a foreign language, which presupposes knowledge of Greek and Latin, along with either German or English. How can one expect other peoples to develop their faith in God in that way?

Alfred's dissertation was published in 1994 under the title *Fatalism as a Problem of Mission Theology: The Contextualization of the Gospel in a Culture of Fatalistic Thinking—the Example of Paraguay*.

Alfred consistently showed Mennonite and evangelical Christians in Paraguay the way by strategically establishing common socially relevant structures. He was an absolutely convinced Mennonite, but he intentionally sought out a Reformed doctoral supervisor (me). This led to many long and fruitful conversations. In addition, he brought together at one table the different wings of Mennonites in Paraguay (and later in Latin America and worldwide), but also a broad spectrum of evangelical Christians.

The Evangelical Alliance of Paraguay and the Evangelical Alliance of Latin America would probably not exist without Alfred. The national Alliance wrote in its obituary, 'We honor the person who in life was the founder and promoter of the Association of Evangelical Churches of Paraguay (ASIEP), also a founding member of the Latin Evangelical Alliance and a member of the International Council of the World Evangelical Alliance, Prof. Dr. Alfred Neufeld. ... He was a tireless fighter for unity not only in his country but also in the whole Latin world.'

Most significant for Christian unity in Paraguay, beyond the theological education in which he was active throughout his life, was his role in helping to found the *Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay* in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay, in 2005. He subsequently served as president of the school's board of directors and also in various administrative positions. In 2012, he became Rector of the entire university and remained so until his death, although he went on leave in January 2020. He led the university in making an increasing commitment to all of Paraguayan society, which I hope that many other countries, especially in Latin America, will view as a model.

Alfred also had global influence as a Mennonite leader. He served as founding chair of the Mennonite World Conference's (MWC) Faith and Life Commission from 2008 to 2018 and as co-chair of the Trilateral Dialogue commission on baptism, which included the Mennonites, the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

John D. Roth, who was director of the MWC Faith and Life Commission during much of Alfred's time as chair, recalled, 'Alfred was an extraordinary leader. With boundless energy, he joined his deep love of Scripture, hymns, theology, and church history, with an equally deep love for the church and the world. The global Anabaptist-Mennonite church has lost a great statesman.' The worldwide community of evangelicals can only agree.

WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

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