

# Bonner Querschnitte

*Bonn Profiles – Press Reports*

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## **BQ 431 – No. 36/2016**

### **An open Letter from Christian Troll and Thomas Schirmacher to Aiman Mazyek – regarding Mazyek’s Warning to Churches on aggressive Missions**

#### **Suggestion for an interreligious Code of Ethics for Missions**

(Bonn, 01.08.2016) Media reports state that Aiman Mazyek, Chairman of the Zentralrat der Muslime (Central Council of Muslims) in Germany made the following statement to the news agency Anadolu: “Freedom of belief is a fundamental right. However, churches should refrain from influencing refugees in this direction. [ . . . ] We expect churches to abstain from aggressive missions work in the same way we expect it from Muslims” (<http://eurasianews.de/blog/zentralrat-der-muslime-kritisiert-christliche-missionierung-von-fluechtlingen/>; omission in original).

In this connection, the Catholic theologian Prof. Dr. Christian Troll and the Evangelical theologian Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmacher wrote the following open letter to Aiman Mazyek:

Dear Mr. Mazyek:

We know each other as joint contenders for religious freedom for Christians as well as for Muslims in Germany. As signatories, we advocate freedom for all religions and worldviews as is irreversibly defined in our Constitution and in our free and democratic order. That naturally includes Muslims being allowed to freely exercise their religion in Germany within the framework of existing laws, and this includes the building of mosques. You have stated it clearly: “Freedom of belief is a fundamental right.”

At the same time, we the signatories are also supporters of *missions*. That means that every citizen is allowed to publicly propagate his religion and worldview, to recommend it to other people, and to discuss it in a free and unhindered manner, indeed peacefully, respectfully, and with attention being paid to all other human rights and without exploiting any dependencies which may exist. For that reason, we advocate the right of Muslims, Christians, humanists, atheists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’i, and all other religions, to conduct missions work. Since they also repeatedly solicit for their faith, it is apparent that ‘missions’ is for them a component of religious freedom. And they only reject “aggressive” missions, arguably not missions *per se*.

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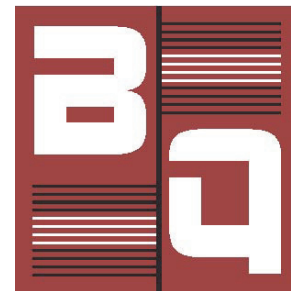
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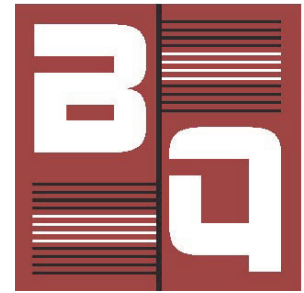
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You warn against “aggressive” missions, if you were quoted correctly. At this point you would do well to mention concrete examples, whereby constitutionally secured, peaceful missions have become unethical aggressive missions. We would agree with you if, for instance, missions are conducted using violence, threats, bribery, the offering of benefits, or similar means. At that point it would not only have to be demonstrable that it has occurred but that it occurs so frequently that it is *typical* for the churches, and not an incidental violation of what the churches patently represent. After all, in 2011 the united global Christian community unequivocally rejected such types of missions in its code of ethics entitled “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” (text available for download [here](#)) and all the churches in Germany accepted the document in 2014 at a consultation in Berlin.

Since it is regrettable that there is such a one-sided code of ethics, coming from one religion and regarding one religion, may we make a suggestion? In Norway all religions and worldviews, including Muslims and Christians, have agreed upon a common code relating to peaceful missions, the so-called “The Oslo Coalition – Missionary Activities and Human Rights: Recommended Ground Rules for Missionary Activities” (Download: [Oslo Coalition Mission and Human Rights Rules](#)). I, Thomas Schirrmacher, was involved early on in its development as an expert on the subject. The country of Norway financed the entire project, the University of Oslo exercised a moderating function, but in the end it was the religious communities and the non-religious associations which each decided independently to also publicly accept the joint text.

We would very much welcome such a document being launched for Germany, and/or a similar effort on an international or even global level.

It is something completely different when it comes to churches discussing to which extent they dispense with mission activities when conducting diaconal or humanitarian work, for that is a *voluntary renunciation*. It is not a renunciation called for from the standpoint of human rights or one which others could call on them to follow. Dispensing with this could make sense. However, this is – as has been taught through experience for decades around the world – easier said than done, for instance if the recipients of assistance wish to know who is behind it or even what the motivation is for offering assistance. (Even refugees can turn to the internet to learn about the memberships and motivations of the people who help them.) But it is a renunciation for religious reasons and not something which arises due to legal dictates. (The renunciation of missions is naturally called for if state monies are used and they are tied to there not being any solicitation for a religion or worldview.)

You point to the example of the baptism of many Iranians in Hamburg. What we have there is, however, not “the churches” but rather a pastor of a free church who is himself an immigrant from Iran. He leads a Persian congregation and sees it as his task to witness to the Christian faith to people from what was his homeland. He also invites them to become Christians, although this also – as far as we are informed – does not occur in an “aggressive” manner and to our knowledge has not led to complaints on the part of converts or those who have been proselytized. However, to demand of “the churches” that this should be stopped is really to address the wrong institution. That would be like your being called upon to stop the convert and Islamist

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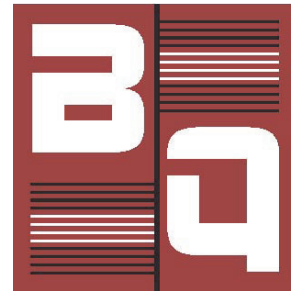
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Pierre Vogel (we are ignoring the political aspect which is also present), who arguably would hardly listen to you. (Editor's note: Pierre Vogel is well known in Germany for converting to Islam and then becoming a public spokesman for radical Wahhabi Islam. For more info click on this link: [Pierre Vogel Radical Islamist Preacher.](#)) All immigrants to Germany essentially enjoy freedom to found churches according to their own notions and to freely proselytize – Africans, Iranians, Koreans or whoever. Other churches have to protect this freedom for the benefit of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. From time to time cooperation can occur or there can be discussions, but there is no sort of authority held by established churches to issue directives.

We hope that you do not trace recently growing numbers of conversions of Muslims to Christianity – above all among Iranian immigrants – exclusively back to aggressive behavior and unethical missions methods, as if it were not possible for a person to make use of his or her right to reach a free decision of self-determination regarding one's deepest religious or non-religious convictions. Additionally, an individual can only be enticed away from a religion if internally he or she has already bowed out of his original religion or original worldview. One cannot move a convinced Christian or a convinced Muslim or a convinced atheist to give up his or her convictions with a few slogans and a bit of aggressive behavior.

Furthermore, we believe that the conversion of Muslims from Iran to the Christian faith has a lot to do with the situation in Iran and very little to do with the situation in Germany. True freedom and less violence on the part of the state in Iran would, we think, reduce the number of conversions immediately.

Every year there are Christians in Germany who convert to Islam. This can also not be explained simply by aggressive missions, i.e., that people only make a change because they were pressured.

As Christians we accord every person the right to leave the church and the Christian faith if that person is no longer convinced – to go instead in whichever direction the individual chooses for an orientation. This also expressly applies to children growing into adulthood who have Christian parents. This should and must be possible without civil consequences, even if this is personally regrettable.

Countries that massively prescribe what their citizens have to believe and utilize force for the protection of a religion are, as a general rule, countries which have very little freedom and in which there is not a high level of peace and tranquility with regard to religious matters. Rather, there is extreme tension. And not by chance it is these countries which also bring about terrorist movements prone to violence that instrumentalize missions as a justification.

Your sincerely,

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmacher, Bonn

Prof. Dr. Christian W. Troll, SJ, Frankfurt

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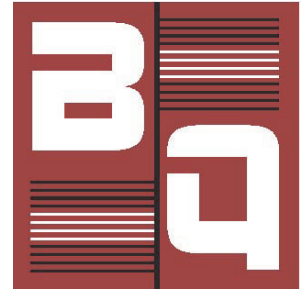
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