

# Bonner Querschnitte

## Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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## BQ 786 – Nr. 09/2024

### Religious dialogue is essential

#### Schirmmacher speaks in the Bundestag at the hearing on the situation of freedom of religion or belief

(Bonn, 02.05.2024) From Bochum to Bolivia: At the public hearing of the Committee on Human Rights on the Federal Government's third report on the global situation of freedom of religion or belief on Wednesday, 24 April 2024, the experts underlined the enormous breadth of the topic – geographically, conceptually and as a field of action in domestic and foreign policy. The categorisation of religious freedom as a human right as well as conceptual points of friction and misunderstandings received a great deal of attention.

The focus of the third report on the situation of indigenous peoples was praised, but also criticised: this was an important and necessary test of the claim of the universality of freedom rights on a group of people that had previously received less attention. On the other hand, this focus ignores global anti-Semitism and the explosive nature of the Middle East conflict, which is unfortunately also being played out here in Germany.



During the hearing © BQ/Martin Wamecke

### Protecting the rights of indigenous peoples

Sandy El Berr, an expert on indigenous peoples from the organisation Bread for the World of the Protestant Agency for Diakonia and Development, called for a holistic strategy from the German government towards indigenous peoples worldwide. By acceding to Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Germany is supporting international efforts to protect the rights of indigenous peoples. This expression of solidarity must now be followed by action in all policy areas. This is not a marginal issue, but a cross-cutting one.

The agreement also resulted in extraterritorial protection obligations under international law, which Germany must fulfil. From agriculture and the raw materials industry to

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infrastructure projects: Large-scale economic projects often threaten the ancestral lands of indigenous peoples – and thus fundamental rights. The displacement of these people also weakens their cults. The indigenous tribes of South America, for example, have made important contributions to society and democratic state-building in their countries.

### Religious freedom as a human right

Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Heiner Bielefeldt, Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at the Institute for Political Science at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, drew attention to the “dramatic” abundance of “highly diverse” violations of religious freedom around the globe. Strengthening religious freedom only makes sense if it is understood as a human right. Conversely, a full understanding of human rights presupposes respect for religious freedom. Otherwise it would be “dehumanised”. It would be fatal to construct artificial antagonists between the two.

Religious freedom is also “not a sacred right” or the “right of the pious”. “All people are entitled to it,” the scientist made clear. This also includes the freedom not to practise a religion. “Even avowed atheists can invoke it.” Strengthening the infrastructure of human rights is the best way to promote religious freedom.

The specific topic of the German government’s report, the focus on indigenous peoples, is a test case for universal rights and is “aimed at the whole”. Everyone should benefit from these universal rights, which include freedom of religion, said Bielefeldt. The aim is to eliminate “blind spots” on the world map. Until then, it was merely a case of “universalism on probation”. We are now looking at “a construction site that has barely been entered” and sending a signal to those who have been forgotten. “The credibility of universalism depends on this.” The topic of the report is therefore not only specific, but also fundamental.

### Persecution of Christians

The philosopher and political scientist Dr. Christian Machek warned that the persecution of Christians should not be forgotten alongside the justified preoccupation with the phenomena of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia and criticised that the Federal Government must set the right priorities. The most persecuted religion worldwide is Christianity. However, this aspect was missing from the report.

Other religions and values around the world should be treated with respect, not lecturing. “Secularism cannot be the sole norm. 85 % of people profess some kind of faith.” It is important to enter into a dialogue.

### Report as a “unique monitoring tool”

The importance and uniqueness of the report was emphasised by Dr. Richard Ottinger, a consultant for international religious dialogue in the Social Cohesion department of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Such a broad foundation of data is rare, he said. This provides a unique monitoring tool, as many other studies only look at individual religious communities or regions.

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Ottinger called for the institution of the Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion or Belief to be safeguarded as a party-politically independent organisation beyond the term of office. This should emphasise the intrinsic value of religion and “promote a fundamental acceptance of the relevance of religion”. There is less and less religious knowledge and contact persons in society. Debates are often conducted emotionally and without expertise.

### More religious education programmes called for

The report has an impact both internally and externally. Unfortunately, the topic of religion is also given far too little importance in German foreign policy and development cooperation, criticised the expert. “We must not ignore an entire reality.” This sends a fatal signal to the recipient countries. “Religion is obviously being minimised. We’ve done better than that before.”

Germany had previously played a leading role in the fight for human rights in the area of religious freedom. Foreign policy engagement should be secular, but not empty. You have to understand your counterpart in order to enter into dialogue with them and to be able to act competently, Ottinger advocated more religious education programmes. Religious education even helps to criticise religion.



Members of the Human Rights Working Group together with the invited experts Dr. Richard Ottinger and Archbishop Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher © BQ/Martin Warnecke

### Religion as part of democracy

The fact that Germany is presenting its own report on the global state of religious freedom is important, said Archbishop Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. mult. Thomas Schirmmacher, Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, San José, Costa Rica and Co-President of Religions for Peace, New York. The issues identified therein would otherwise not be made public. Foreign policy needs this “effective information”. Religion and worldview are “constitutive for being human”, for our innermost convictions, our identity, said the churchman. This applies to Muslims as well as humanists.

Although there is a separation of religion and state in Germany, religion and politics cannot be separated. Religion is part of democracy. Freedom of religion also permeates all human rights. “I can’t take the issue out of the equation.” One must always consider the ideological motivation behind an individual decision. Hardly any other human right is individually “felt so directly”.

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### Dialogue between the religious communities

Many countries are home to “highly religious people. It matters to them how we talk about it.” In order to be respected as a dialogue partner, one should know what is going on and be subject to the same standards as others. It is important to realise that in many countries, dialogue is only possible in conjunction with religious dialogue, explained the bishop and called for dialogue between religious communities in order to overcome conflicts.

Extremist religious leaders, from the Islamic world to the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, were “the main obstacle to peace”. It is important to enter into dialogue with moderate and peace-loving members of religious groups. “That’s where the opportunities lie. Religion is not set in stone.” Religious leaders are in favour of peace in principle. The task of the state is to moderate such dialogues in the background, flanked by “a realpolitik of small steps”. There is even hope for the Middle East.

It was important to choose the indigenous peoples, beyond the major world religions, as the focus of the report, said Schirmmacher. These are “people who live in completely different cultural contexts. But they have exactly the same claim to human rights. Their land is being taken from them and their spirituality is being erased.” Anyone who violates religious freedom by attacking believers is acting criminally and violating human rights. It is “the duty of all of us” to defend religious freedom in Germany, as it is part of the country’s identity. “Hundreds of thousands” had come here because they were allowed to practise their religion freely and openly.

### Jewish life in Germany

Hanna Veiler, President of the Jewish Student Union of Germany, addressed the current situation of Jews worldwide and in Germany in particular. When she thinks of the constant threats to Jewish life, such as the planned attack on the synagogue in Bochum, or just the everyday ignorance of the Jewish calendar, she finds it difficult to speak of religious freedom in Germany. Nobody would have to go to university at Christmas. But exams are written on major Jewish holidays, which Jewish students cannot attend for ritual reasons. Danger to life and limb and such discrimination: From a German perspective, establishing religious freedom is first and foremost a domestic political task, said Veiler.

It is important to realise the causes and mechanisms of anti-Semitism. People harbour numerous codes, images and narratives that condense into a world view and reproduce these consciously or unconsciously. Especially in difficult times, “when people are looking for simple explanations”, these are “quickly reactivated”. The Jewish community as a whole is then pilloried, and Israel also becomes a projection surface for hatred. Anti-Semitism often goes hand in hand with other forms of racism. In order to be able to talk about the Middle East conflict in Germany at all and to avoid slipping into Israel-related anti-Semitism, a deeper understanding of the context and history of the Middle East conflict as well as of anti-Semitism is needed, said Veiler.

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### Rethinking Iran policy called for

Internationally, German foreign policy must be much more clearly directed against Iran and the “immense danger” posed by the Tehran regime, which has been responsible for numerous attacks on Jews worldwide over decades, culminating in the Hamas rocket attacks on Israel on 7 October last year. Iran is the backer of the Hamas ideology. “It wouldn’t have worked without Iran.”



(from left): Richard Ottinger, Thomas Schirmmacher, Heiner Bielefeldt, Frank Schwabe in conversation © BQ/Martin Warnecke

“7 October should have led to a stronger reconsideration of German-Iranian relations,” said the expert. Germany was being “too nice” to Iran and instead needed tougher sanctions, up to and including breaking off relations. Otherwise, Germany would not be living up to its own claim that protecting Israel is part of the *raison d’être* of the state. “We must resolutely stand together against the dangers that jeopardise religious freedom.” (11/25.04.2024)

Source: Press release of the Deutsche Bundestag, the German Federal Parliament

#### Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1:** During the hearing © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 2:** Members of the Human Rights Working Group together with the invited experts Dr. Richard Ottinger and Archbishop Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 3** (from left): Richard Ottinger, Thomas Schirmmacher, Heiner Bielefeldt, Frank Schwabe in conversation © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Briefing: Third Report of the Federal Government on the Global Situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief (reporting period 2020 to 2022): <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/095/2009580.pdf>
- Expert opinion by Thomas Schirmmacher: <https://www.thomasschirmmacher.info/artikel/anhoerung-zur-lage-der-religions-und-weltanschauungsfreiheit/>
- Video of the entire hearing: <https://dbtg.tv/cvid/7610222>

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