



Office of Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations

Welcoming address of the World Evangelical Alliance on the opening of the new professorial chair “Religious Freedom” at the Freie Theologische Hochschule in Gießen, Germany, on May 18th 2018

Dear celebrating assembly,

first of all I want to convey the greetings of bishop Efraim Tendero of Manila, the General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, which represents 600 mission Protestants, and also of Godfrey Yogarajah of Sri Lanka, the director of WEA’s Religious Liberty Commission and chairman of the International Institute of Religious Freedom. Both also wish to personally compliment professor Sauer, as well as professor Stephan Holthaus as the college’s farsighted headmaster. I may include in my greetings also the ones of the German Evangelical Alliance and its work groups “Religious Freedom – Human Rights – Commitment for Persecuted Christians” and “Migration and Integration”, which is represented by Hartmut Steeb, the General Secretary, by Uwe Heimowski, the Commissioner at the German Bundestag and Federal Government, und by Herbert Putz, the Legal Secretary for Migration and Integration, as well as the representatives of the International Information Office for Religious Freedom, Germany, whose chairman, pastor Dr. Paul Murdoch sends his warmest greetings, and whose second chairman, vicar Dr. Daniel Röthlisberger is with us today.

I especially welcome the former federal minister and leading member of our parliament, Mr. Hermann Gröhe. He has in 1999 – at that time still in the opposition – initiated the first discussion of our theme in the German Parliament and was outraged afterwards, seeing the thin and unreliable data provided by us. His sentence “That must change” had the effect, that professor Sauer and I founded the IIRF, which today has offices on all continents. Dear Mr. Gröhe, my deepest thanks for this most momentous rebuke in all my life, which, in the last analysis, was the key factor for the establishment of this professorial chair. And also the new office of the Federal Government Commissioner for International Freedom of Religion, which is held by Mr. Markus Grübler, whom I warmly welcome in our midst as well, has its final origin in this instance.

Repeatedly I am asked, why it is that the Commission for Religious Freedom and the International Institute for Freedom of Religion are part of the department of theological concerns of the World Evangelical Alliance, which I coordinate, and not, say, of the political department. This is due to the fact, that for us freedom of religion for all people of all faiths is not just an important political concept and human right, but an integral part of our theological DNA. The conception, that faith in God means individual believing and trusting, precludes all forms of compulsion and fraud in matters of believing or non-believing as well as all questioning an individual’s convictions.

When the movement of the Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846, one of the four pillars was freedom of religion. Many churches – let me overstate a bit – could at that time not even spell the word yet; in Europe the system of state church was still widely prevailing. The numerous pastors of the state churches, as in England or Germany, who got involved in the Alliance, were mostly considered as traitors by their own churches. Gerhard Lindemann has – in his habilitation treatise of over 900 pages – traced, how during the second half of the century the Evangelical Alliance has declared freedom of religion to be a European topic. Summarising he writes: “With their engagement for freedom of religion the Alliance rendered a valuable service to the enforcement of civil freedoms in the countries concerned and made no insignificant contribution to the development of a European civil society” (p. 843) ... “with an influence extending even to Russia and Japan”.

Let me expound briefly on Lindemann’s results. The Homburg Conference for Religious Freedom of 1853 was a milestone in the history of the Alliance and of tolerance in Germany and Europe (263-267). Core result was the rejection of all clerical violence against seceders and the refusal of any utilisation of state violence by churches against others (266). This was deliberately applied not only to Christians, but to all religions, which naturally resulted in sharp protest on the part of protestant state churches (267-272).

In the year 1861 a French pastor first put forward the brand-new thesis, which prevailed more and more within the Alliance, that “freedom of religion guarantees state order and its intrinsic peace” (592), whereas suppression of individual freedom of religion feeds discord and withdraws from the state its god-given foundation!

When the Alliance sent a delegation in the year 1858 to protest against Sweden, whose highest court, the Royal Court of Justice, had expelled six women, who had converted from Lutheranism to Roman Catholicism (!), from the country, and when the Alliance demanded freedom of religion for these Catholics, a storm of protest arose all over Europe (295-300). The Alliance was significantly involved, when the Swedish parliament in 1860 abrogated all punishments for leaving the Lutheran state church.

The Alliance’s broad-mindedness appeared also in the fact, that they intervened with the Sultan on behalf of converts from Islam to Protestantism, but also on behalf of the Greek-Orthodox Church (300). In Iran they stood up for the so-called “Nestorians” (610-613).

We are very pleased that today leading German politicians are celebrating the opening of the professorial chair for religious freedom. That also has got history to it. Audiences, which the Alliance was granted with the Prussian king, as for instance 1855 in Cologne, or 1857 (286f) always involved freedom of religion. The same counts für conversations, which the secretaries of the Alliance had with the German Emperor William I. and the Imperial Chancellor Otto v. Bismarck in 1875 (919). An Alliance deputation to Emperor Franz Joseph I. and subsequent talks with the prime minister and the education minister resulted in noticeable relief for Protestants, and, in 1880, even in their legal recognition (913).

The same is true also for the visit of the participants of the International Alliance Conference, which met in New York, to the American president Ulysses S. Grant and his cabinet in 1873 (755-756), with the only difference, that the American government did not have to be persuaded of the benefit of religious freedom any more.

To my opinion the Evangelical Alliance has in the following 170 years been quite successful in holding the balance between a strong commitment to religious freedom on its own

account and for Christian churches of all confessions and an equally strong and clear commitment to the religious freedom of all people, even the non-religious, or, as it is aptly called, to “Freedom of Religion or Belief”. The naming of the new professorial chair points out, that this good tradition will be continued here.

It has time and again been criticised, that the IIRF – although scientifically completely independent – is still associated with a large religious community. It’s exactly the other way round, though. All large religious communities and ideological groups should also have such an institution! For, if religions and ideologies do not stand up actively and organized for freedom of religion, who else would? Such a professional chair belongs naturally to a theological college, and not just to one of them! I have a dream, that one day even Islamic faculties will quite naturally research into this topic – as it already partly the case in Indonesia! One might as well ask (to consider another example), who would want women’s politics without participation of women’s associations?

At this point thanks are due first of all to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Württemberg, represented by their bishop Frank Otfried July, with whom I held many conversations, but also to the whole Superior Church Council and, last not least, the large synod of the church of Württemberg (holding the financial autonomy), without which the institution would not exist in this form and without which the new professorial chair could not have been opened, since the synod released pastor Sauer from his duties for this research- and teaching-activity on behalf of religious freedom.

When I had the chance last year to speak to the synod on the subject of human rights, I realized once more: The church of Württemberg, with tremendously ecumenical foresight, supports projects, whose effects on the whole of Christianity and on their relations to one another are enormous, irrespective of whether or not she gets something out of it for herself.

I am convinced, that the Freie Theologische Hochschule will not regret to have got involved here and also to align the new professorial chair with the classical Christian curriculum of theology. It will neither regret it with regard to research and internationality, nor with regard to student numbers and research projects, nor even in financial respects.

My last thanks is due in the name of the discriminated and persecuted of all religions, who know, that only publicity and reliable facts will be able to pull them out of the darkness of forgetfulness and will make political action possible. Vicariously Ignatius Ephräim II. Karim, the Patriarch of the Syrian-Orthodox Church, with whom I had the honour to dedicate a church near Gießen, sincerely asked me during the Global Christian Forum in Bogota to thank the Freie Theologische Hochschule for its commitment. Professor Sauer should hold a guest lecture at the new master course in Syrian theology at the university of Salzburg.

Thomas Schirmmacher