

Inter-religious cooperation does not contradict absolute truth claims

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Thomas Schirmacher

Greetings to all who are with us today, in person and virtually, for this important event in our joint efforts to build a safer and more peaceful and just world.

It is possible to advocate for religious freedom, social harmony, and inter-religious cooperation without sharing the convictions of other religious groups. The World Evangelical Alliance expresses this conviction as follows: "The WEA differentiates between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and endorsing the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe" ("Resolution on Religious Freedom, October 30, 2008, www.iirf.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/WEA_Res_ENG.pdf).

Relativists, or people who lack firm, deep convictions about absolute truth, are much less capable of meaningful dialogue because they are no longer really sure what they believe. In contrast, significant collaboration can happen between groups who *do* know what they believe, because they can identify areas of clear agreement and work together in those areas.

People who are convinced of what they believe to be true never have to fear listening to others or exchanging good arguments. They can engage in conversation, collaboration, and friendship even while feeling that the dialogue partner is wrong on certain point. Indeed, if there were no disagreements, what would the point of dialogue be?

Conversely, freedom and harmony do not emerge automatically when religious communities or non-religious people give up their truth claims.

Within each of our two faith traditions, Christianity and Islam, there are multiple theological schools—most notably, Shiite and Sunni Islam or Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic Christianity. Through history, these differing streams within each tradition have sometimes been at war and sometimes at peace with each other. But where the different wings co-exist peacefully, the reason is never that they agree about everything. Rather, it is either because they have been forced by the state to peacefully coexist (which hardly represents a permanent solution) or because they have themselves decided to limit their differences to matters of theology and faith and not try to decide their theological differences through force. Peace in the political realm cannot be achieved through theological uniformity.

The U.S. Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The United States has not always lived up to those standards. African Americans have been held as slaves. Cultural and religious freedoms have been restricted. Yet the message of the Declaration remains self-evident and true for all who will open their hearts to it. God created us as human beings in a wonderful way, not to live like lone rangers but in solidarity with our families and communities, with all races and peoples around us, and especially with the poor, underprivileged and enslaved.

This solidarity calls us to do all we can to protect the vast majority of peaceful citizens from the small number of religious extremists who misuse the name of God, Allah, or religion and kill those with whom they have theological disagreements, even within their own faith tradition.

When we work hand in hand against extremists in both our faith traditions and in favor of the common good of our societies, we do not minimize our truth claims. Rather, we are each following our truth claims, which include the belief that God wants peace and justice for all. God's truth will

prevail in the end, and we should not act as if discussing what we believe in depth and in the public square might endanger it.

Praise be to God.

Bishop Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirmacher

Secretary General, World Evangelical Alliance