

# **Bishop Schirmacher Tribute**

**Ambassador (Rabbi) David Saperstein**

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In the short time I have on this program, I would far exceed my allotted time if I simply read Bishop Dr. Thomas Schirmacher's impressive resume – and even less would I have time to complete a reading of titles of his over 100 books he has published, even if I could pretend to pronounce the titles in the 18 languages into which they have been translated.

So I will focus from an interfaith perspective on three aspects of his remarkable career most relevant to this beautiful Festschrift from such respected scholars and/or relevant to the urgent responsibilities he will now assume as the Secretary General/CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance.

First is Bishop Schirmacher's abiding commitment to religious freedom. We see alarmingly religious persecution, oppression, discrimination increasingly infringing on the most fundamental expression of people's conscience, humanity, and belief in the Divine. And, since every religion and religious grouping, including Muslims and Evangelicals, is a minority somewhere – such oppression has been felt by every religion, in too many cases with alarming urgency. In my travels to over 80 nations, I've seen clearly how Evangelicals are so often the victims of such treatment in varied nations across the globe, including some Muslim countries, making this book so timely and vitally needed. I should point out as well that the relation of Christians and Muslims has been one of Christine's influential areas of academic research.

Second, the Bishop's commitment to individual salvation and to evangelism is matched by his commitment to societal justice, societal compassion and empathy. It infuses his concern for the poor within our communities and at a global level; it infuses his concern for our responsibility to protect God's creation for all God's children – both today's children and those of generations yet to come (the latter I view as one of religion's great contribution to our understanding of ethics) ; and it infuses his commitment to ensuring that all, rich and poor, men and women, Christian and non-Christians, can fulfill their God-given potential.

The third is the Bishop's abiding commitment to interfaith dialogue, understanding and cooperation. That Islam and Evangelicalism, numerically two of the three largest expressions of religious faith on Earth, are, in recent years, shaping a dialogue represented so richly and insightfully in this book's essays is testimony to the inspiring impact this servant of God, who will now assume this vital leadership post of the WEA, has on so many. And the book is an achievement that is not only a reflection of NU's generosity of spirit and resources ( we are so honored that Pak Yahja is here) and of their own commitment to religious tolerance and understanding, but also of the

remarkable work and talents of the gifted editors. Dr. Schirrmacher's interfaith efforts, of course, are perhaps best known for his tireless role helping to lead a five year process resulting in the first-ever joint statement by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches and World Evangelical Alliance on world mission and human rights.

Look: We all sense this generation will be seen as a crossroads in human history. This moment of history requires religious leaders of vision; leaders of theological depth not only to address the needs of her or his own followers but to engage as an equal with great thinkers of other faiths; leaders with organizational talents; leaders who can adapt to new times, addressing new challenges and new fears; leaders who are, at once, great thinkers, writers, and teachers. Blessed with having been chosen to serve in 2019-20 as the President of my own International denomination, I can tell you that finding so many varied leaders, in order to accumulate such needed skills, is a challenge that every denomination, faith group, and religious organization faces. That WEA has now found all these varied leaders in one remarkable pastor -- is something truly extraordinary. It is a blessing for Evangelicals, even while it is a blessing for all of us who engage with this vital community.

I've been told that German newspapers have referred to Thomas Schirrmacher as "one of the three leading experts on religious freedom globally" and "Pope Francis's most loved Protestant". This is quite a compliment indeed -- but it does not surprise me. And our gathering here today with the Bishop is another affirmation that Thomas Schirrmacher is so greatly admired and appreciated not only by Popes and Imams -- but by all of us as well.

So, thank you, Bishop, for your visionary leadership and your journey that has brought you here today. In the words of the Jewish tradition, my friend, may you go *m'chayil l'chayil*, from strength to strength -- not only for these next five years of WEA leadership but for so many years to come.

*Rabbi David Saperstein is the former US-Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (2014-2017). The rabbi and attorney served for 40 years as the Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC), overseeing the national social justice programming for the largest segment of American Jewry. In 1999, Saperstein served as the first Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. In 2009 he was appointed by President Obama as a member of the first White House Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. In 2019/20, Rabbi Saperstein served as the President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the international arm of the Reform Jewish Movement. As an attorney, he taught seminars on Church-State law and on comparative Jewish and American Law for 35 years at Georgetown University Law Center and continues his academic work as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's Foreign Service School and Center for Jewish Civilization and as a Distinguished Fellow at the PM Glynn Institute at Australian Catholic University. He was designated by "Newsweek Magazine" as the most influential rabbi in America and by the Washington Post as the "quintessential religious lobbyist on Capitol Hill" and has received many awards around the globe and honorary doctorates from several universities, eg from Yale University in 2016.*