

IIRF Reports

International Institute for Religious Freedom
Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse



Thomas Schirrmacher

Panel on Cyber-Religion by the International Institute for Religious Freedom at the Global Media Forum 2012

Bonn – Cape Town – Colombo

A monthly journal with special reports,
research projects, reprints and documentation

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Thomas Schirrmacher (Editor)

Panel on Cyber-Religion by the International Institute for Religious Freedom at the Global Media Forum 2012



Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Schirrmacher, PhD, DD is director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo), professor of the sociology of religion at the State University of the West in Timisoara (Romania) and Distinguished Professor of Global Ethics and International Development at William Carey University in Shillong (Meghalaya, India), as well as speaker for human rights of the World Evangelical Alliance, speaking for appr. 600 million Christians. He is member of the board of the International Society for Human Rights. His newest publications include books on 'Fundamentalism', 'Racism', and 'Christians and Democracy'. (Photo: Schirrmacher (left) with the UN-Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief at a double lecture in Nuremberg.)

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"IIRF as one of the sponsors of the GMF, see left below".

Panel on Cyber-Religion by the International Institute for Religious Freedom at the Global Media Forum (press release)

The three-day Global Media Forum in Bonn, Germany, hosted 2.000 top journalists from 110 countries. The congress sought to examine the role the media play as they broadcast images and disseminate messages to a rapidly changing world. The congress is organised yearly by Deutsche Welle, Germany's international broadcaster.

Every year the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) of World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), an official partner of the Global Media Forum, hosts a panel, this year under the topic : *The spread of extremism and of peace through internet and social media.*

Internet and social media play a central role in spreading religious and non-religious extremism globally. Both tools can also be used to cool down tensions and to develop peace among different religious, ethnic or national groups. Individual people can make a difference here and launch large social media campaigns.

The example of a former Christian pastor who had announced his plan to burn a copy of the Quran in May 2011, and the global media attention following this event, was evaluated and contrasted with a discussion of how Christians and Muslims worldwide did better at the same time to calm down tensions between religious, ethnic or national groups and prevented any killing as a result.

Hundreds of examples from the internet and social media were shown on the screen by the experts, eg a campaign where people in Nigeria post on a mass scale banners like "I like Christians" and "I like Muslims". Most impressive was a campaign by Israelis "I love Iranians". Hundred thousands of Iranians posted back "I like Israelis".

Prof. Dr. Christine Schirrmacher, teaching at the State University of Bonn and leading the International Institute for Islamic Studies of the World Evangelical Alliance, focused her contribution on the spreading of worldviews, religious and political opinions through the medium of the internet. She explained the impact of this tool on the Muslim community since the internet for the first time in history creates a real worldwide "ummah" (Muslim community) and connects its members all the way from the island of Java/Indonesia to the mosques in Canada or the Sufi groups in Mali. She showed how Muslim extremists manipulate their followers by the internet and how they use

the current technology of new media on a global scale in order to radicalize their audience. Major theologians like Qaradawi often work out of nowhere and influence immigrants all over the globe. Schirrmacher contrasted the influence of Qaradawi with the influence of Quran scholar Abdullah Saeed, who spoke at the workshop 2011, propagating religious freedom and tolerance in the name of Islam.

Joseph Yakubu, the research coordinator of the IIRF from Nigeria, introduced the participants into the world of Nigeria, the most religious country in the world, and its internet use with calls to extremism as well as large campaigns towards peacefully living together. Boko Haram was portrayed as an extremist group which recruits young people through the web and launches campaigns against the government. The internet, social media and SMS are used to further "othering and stereotyping of enemies". "IT" is used to spread rumours on planned supposed attacks or secret goals of the enemy. At the same time the internet and social media are the greatest hope to overcome conflicts, as millions of Nigerians fight for peacefully living together, eg the website MuslimsAgainstTerror.com.

In his presentation Professor Rainer Rothfuss, professor of geography at the State University of Tübingen and member of the academic board of the IIRF, argued that the world has entered the age of mass communication and modern media. Today, the world has 5.600.000.000 cell phone users, 2.267.233.742 internet users and almost 1.000.000.000 face book users. He showed how powerful social media and internet are in religious and other conflicts. At the University of Vienna over 6.000 Islamist hate instigating web videos have been collected and analyzed within the "Jihadism online" project. Professor Rothfuss stressed that the present and future challenge to secure peaceful intercultural and interreligious coexistence on a local and global level calls for a strict containment of cyber-extremism but also for a transformation of inter-cultural communication to promote peace across "borders in minds". Among the hard measures should be a more effective monitoring to detect critical organizations and initiatives early enough to prevent later real terrorist attacks.

At the end, the moderator Prof. Thomas Schirrmacher, director of the IIRF, used the "Global Charter of Conscience" (charterofconscience.org), that had been launched in the European Parliament some days before, and that gathered major signers from all over

the world through the internet, as a good example for religious and non-religious leaders to propagate peaceful engagement in the global civil public square.

*Text in official report
volume of Global Media Forum 2012*

Cyber-Religion: The spread of extremism and of peace through internet and social media

Hosted by the International Institute for Religious Freedom

Panel:

Rainer Rothfuß, Prof. Dr., Geographical Institute of the University of Tuebingen, Tuebingen, Germany

Christine Schirrmacher, Prof. Dr., University of Bonn and the International Institute for Islamic Studies, Bonn, Germany

Joseph Yakubu, Dd. phil., MA, Research Coordinator, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, Jos, Nigeria

Moderation:

Thomas Schirrmacher, Prof. Dr. Dr., The International Institute for Religious Freedom and the University of Timisoara; Bonn, Germany and Timisoara, Romania

Internet and social media play a central role in spreading religious and non-religious extremism globally. Both tools can also be used to cool down tensions and to develop peace among different religious, ethnic or national groups. Individual people can make a difference here and launch large social media campaigns.

The example of a former Christian pastor who had announced his plan to burn a copy of the Quran in May 2011, and the global media attention following this event, was evaluated and contrasted with a discussion of how Christians and Muslims worldwide did better at the same time to calm down tensions between religious, ethnic or national groups and prevented any killing as a result.

Hundreds of examples from the internet and social media were shown on the screen by the experts, eg a campaign where people in Nigeria post on a mass scale banners like “I like Christians” and “I like Muslims”. Most impressive was a campaign by Israelis “I love Iranians”. Hundred thousands of Iranians posted back “I like Israelis”.

Prof. Dr. Christine Schirrmacher focused her contribution on the spreading of worldviews, religious and political opinions through the medium of the internet. She explained the impact of this tool on the Muslim community since the internet for the first time in history creates a worldwide “ummah” (Muslim community) and connects its members all the way from the island of Java/Indonesia to the mosques in Canada or the Sufi groups in Mali. She showed how Muslim extremists manipulate their followers by the internet and how they use the current technology of new media on a global scale in order to radicalize their audience. Major theologians like Qaradawi often work out of nowhere and influence immigrants all over the globe. Schirrmacher contrasted the influence of Qaradawi with the influence of Quran scholar Abdullah Saeed, who spoke at the workshop 2011, propagating religious freedom in the name of Islam.

Joseph Yakubu introduced the participants into the world of Nigeria, the most religious country in the world, and its internet use with calls to extremism as well as large campaigns towards peacefully living together. Boko Haram was portrayed as an extremist group which recruits young people through the web and launches campaigns against the government. The internet, social media and SMS are used to further “othering and stereotyping of enemies”. IT is used to spread rumours on planned supposed attacks or secret goals of the enemy. At the same time the internet and social media are the greatest hope to overcome conflicts, as millions of Nigerians fight for peacefully living together, eg the website MuslimsAgainstTerror.com.

In his presentation Professor Rothfuss argued that the world has entered the age of mass communication and modern media. Today, the world has 5.600.000.000 cell phone users, 2.267.233.742 internet users and almost 1.000.000.000 face book users. He showed how powerful social media and internet are in religious and other conflicts. At the University of Vienna over 6.000 Islamist hate instigating web videos have been collected and analyzed within the “Jihadism online” project. Professor Rothfuss stressed that the present and future challenge to secure peaceful intercultural and interreligious coexistence on a local and global level calls for a strict containment of cyber-extremism but also for a transformation of inter-cultural communication to promote peace across “borders in minds”. Among the hard measures should be a more effective monitoring to detect critical organizations and initiatives early enough to prevent later real terrorist attacks.



At the end, the moderator Prof. Thomas Schirmmacher used the “Global Charter of Conscience” (charterofconscience.org), that had been launched in the European Parliament some days before, and that gathered major signers from all over the world through the internet, as a good example for religious and non-religious leaders to propagate peaceful engagement in the global civil public square.

Compilation of summaries

Cyber-Religion: The spread of extremism and of peace through internet and social media

Internet and social media play a central role in spreading religious and non-religious extremism globally. But both tools can be used to cool down tensions and to convey peace between different religions, ethnic or national groups.

Experts will explain how some religious leaders like Muslim extremists manipulate their followers by the internet and how they use the current technology of new media in order to radicalize their audience. The example of a former Christian pastor who had announced his plan to burn a copy of the Quran in Mai 2011, and the global media attention following this event will be evaluated and contrasted with a discussion of how Christians and Muslims worldwide did better at the same time to calm down tensions between religious, ethnic or national groups. There will be also

an illustration of the more local example of Nigeria by someone knowing most religious leaders on both sides. Positive examples of mutual understanding and trust between former conflict parties will give insight into strategies of how to use the internet and the social media in order to create peace and understanding.

Moderator:

Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher, International Institute for Religious Freedom, University of Timisoara, Romania

Prof. Dr. Rainer Rothfuß, University of Tuebingen, Germany

Speakers:

Prof. Dr. Christine Schirmmacher, University of Bonn and International Institute for Islamic Studies

Joseph Yakubu, Nigeria, Research Coordinator of the International Institute for Religious Freedom

Summary Yakubu

Cyber-Religion: The Spread of Extremism and Peace through the Internet and Social Media: The Case of Nigeria

Yakubu Joseph

The digital revolution has presented humankind with huge possibilities. In particular, the internet and social media are greatly impacting on the fabric of society and transforming every sphere of life. The ambivalent



Yakubu left and Schirrmacher after an interview with Nigerian State Radio

relationship between religion, the internet and social media reflects this reality. This relationship is embodied in the concept of ‘cyber-religion,’ which refers to the phenomenon where the internet and social media have become increasingly important social arenas for exploring and encountering religion. Hence, the internet and social media facilitate the dissemination of religious messages and sentiments as well as mobilising people, for better or for worse. It is this transformational power of the internet and social media and how they are being used to exploit the peace and conflict potential of religion in Nigeria that is our focus here. Religion has been one of the major fault lines in the country. Pernicious cycles of sectarian violence, causing huge human and material losses, have plagued the most populous African country¹ in recent years. Increasingly, the internet and social media implicate and are implicated in the religious conflicts – para-

doxically, they are being used by some to advance the cause of peace and by others to promote hatred and violent extremism.

Nigeria has an internet penetration of 29% with over 45 million users, the highest in Africa.² There are more than 4 million Facebook users.³ Mobile telephone (GSM) lines and teledensity are in excess of 120 million and 73 respectively.⁴ Majority of internet and social media users access the services on smart phones. Religious people have taken advantage of the rapid growth of internet penetration and social media to connect with each other and to win followers. Religious zeal is one of the sources of pride for most Nigerians. People are proud to showcase their religiosity by displaying stickers and using any avenue

¹Nigeria’s population is over 167 million according the Nigeria Population Commission.

²Internet World Stats. URL: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

³Ibid.

⁴Nigerian Communication Commission. URL: http://www2.ncc.gov.ng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=125&Itemid=73

to express their faith, even though failing to strike a balance between such show of religiosity and good deeds undermines religion itself. The show-up messages are numerous and mind boggling. A few of them are: "I want all my Facebook friends to know that I love Jesus;" "Muslim, I am, and I will die as one (Insha Allah);" "Born Catholic, Raised Catholic, Stay Catholic and Die catholic;" and "I love Allah." People also get inundated with Short Message Service (SMS) and emails with religious messages instructing the recipients to forward to a specified number of other contacts as a sign of commitment to one's faith or in order to receive certain blessings. On Facebook, such messages command users to 'like' the post and 'share' as a sign of faithfulness.

A BBC survey found Nigeria to be the most religious country in the world. As high as 90% of Nigerians believe strongly in God, pray regularly and affirm their readiness to die for the cause of their belief.⁵ The country's population is almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam. Varieties of traditional religions are also found. Perennial tension between the adherents of the two major religions, which overlaps with inter-ethnic rivalries, has polarized the population and resulted in cycle of violence mainly across the northern region of the country. Since 2009, the Islamic sect Boko Haram has been launching a campaign of terror against the Nigerian state and people. Boko Haram's terrorist attacks have targeted government installations, United Nations country office, churches and Christian homes, Muslims and clerics as well as traditional rulers who openly opposed the group's ideology.

The internet and social media are increasingly being used to promote extremism in the country. In the past, young Nigerians who were attracted to extremist messages had to visit foreign Web sites, but now there are homegrown extremist materials on the internet. Boko Haram, which is opposed to Western (modern) style of education, for example, has taken advantage of the internet to release its messages and issue threats. The group posts videos and audios on YouTube. They have several sermons that seek to attract followers to their ideology and radical brand of Islam. The group justifies its terrorist activities and claims responsibilities for attacks it carries out by posting videos and audio messages. In such messages, the group claims it is carrying out the will of Allah and fighting in defense of Islam, a position rejected by majority of Nigerian

Muslims. Boko Haram has also engaged in a sort of propaganda warfare against the Nigerian government through its releases on social media. Some of their messages have been directed at the President of Nigeria and security forces.

The internet and social media have also provided the platform for *othering* and stereotyping. SMS is often used to circulate rumours of impending 'planned attacks' by the other religious group. Such messages often turn viral causing a scare among the people. Due to recurrent violence, Nigerians have learnt not to ignore such messages, sometimes prompting the government to issue statements to debunk the rumours or to beef up security. Other messages circulated through SMS paint an enemy picture of and demonise the *other*. These messages promote mutual suspicion, mistrust and hate between Christians and Muslims. The media landscape in Nigeria has changed considerably in the last few years, with many local newspapers going online. No issue appears to generate as much enthusiasm among Nigerian readers as the subject of religion and conflict. The space for comments on articles or reports on sectarian violence often gets turned into a 'cyber battle field' for the contest over public opinion and vicious attacks on the *other* religion. Online newspapers that promote citizen journalism do little to filter nasty and incendiary comments. The bitterness and angst conveyed by the postings obviously indicate the acrimony and division that runs deep in the population.

The internet and social media also serve as platforms for inter-religious peacemaking. In the last three years, many Nigerians, especially the youths, have taken their quest for peace, in reaction to the constant sectarian violence and seeming protracted animosity between Christians and Muslims, to the cyberspace. Several online communities and e-groups have been established to campaign for peace and mutual accommodation among the followers of the two religions. These online communities have open membership cutting across religious and ethnic differences. Peace messages, breaking news and warning alerts are shared and members engage in a free and uncensored dialogue. For example, in response to tension that was flared up between Christians and Muslims as a result of the surge in bombing attacks against churches by Boko Haram from the end of 2011 several peace messages circulated. Some of these messages are: "I am a Nigerian, I love every other tribe, I condemn violence;" "Terrorism has no religion, please people stop this insanity;" "I am a Muslim, I love Christians and I condemn Boko Haram;" and "I am a Christian, I love Muslims and I condemn Boko Haram."

⁵Is Nigeria on the brink after north-south clashes? BBC News Africa, 13 January 2012. URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16544410>

A new Web site launched in 2012 bears the name MuslimsAgainstTerror.com with the motto From Nigeria to the World: We Denounce Terror. The site condemns Boko Haram's actions as anti-Islamic and calls on Nigerian Muslims to join hands with Christians to overcome the Boko Haram menace. The people behind the initiative declare their commitment to the defense of the religious freedom of Christians and offer to provide physical protection to churches against attacks. The site issues strong condemnation on attacks against churches. On 24 June 2012, the Muslims Against Terror issued a statement on its Web site denouncing the attacks on churches and outlining a strategy (guidelines) on how to protect churches:

We have been deliberating on how to extend an arm of compassion to our fellow Christian's in a time of harshness and perdition and how to be a part of the end to the Harj (killings) in our beloved nation.

The guidelines

1. *Please dress simple with white preferably. Have a sign that states your mission. Simply write 'Vigilante Security', on the sign.*
2. *First-Pat-down and search every brother who volunteers, there must not be any weapons or dangerous material on any one! No bags etc. Only sticks and batons may be used. You can contact us for tasers.*
3. *Please ensure you first approach the Church you wish to defend and ask them where they will like you to stand and where may be vulnerable. Have their security persons phone number.*
4. *Please discuss the ways you can be of assistance with any security officers in the area.*
5. *Please have police phone numbers at the ready.*
6. *Apply absolute discretion at all times. Be only ready to accost and have planks to put in front of suspicious cars that may be speeding toward the Church.*

*Allah be with us.*⁶

Lastly, the internet and social media offer hope for strengthening and rebuilding of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. As a result of the relentless sectar-

ian violence in northern Nigeria there has been socio-spatial segregation in many cities in the region. For example, in Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi, Plateau and other states Christians and Muslims tend to by and large live in different neighbourhoods. Therefore, the internet and social media help to bridge such growing physical and social divides engendered by sectarian conflicts, and provide a social space for Nigerians to connect and sensitise each other and raise awareness about the need for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In places like Jos and Kaduna, where people cannot venture to enter into certain neighbourhoods because of fear of the *other*, some rely partly on social media to connect with old friends and people they had grown up with but have been separated by conflicts. Perhaps, the internet and social media would make up for the failure of face-to-face interfaith dialogue and peace-making to abate the vicious cycles of violence that befalls Nigeria by enabling people to engage in meaning and constructive conversation devoid of theatrical gimmicks and based on a mutual search for social justice and religious freedom for all.

Summary Rothfuss

Cyber Religion: From Confrontation to Communication in the Age of Internet

Prof. Dr. Rainer Rothfuss

In his presentation Professor Rothfuss argued that the world has entered the age of mass communication and modern media. Today, the world has 5.600.000.000 cell phone users, 2.267.233.742 internet users and almost 1.000.000.000 face book users. Today, there is also a more direct confrontation of different cultures through migration and media. The instigating or pacifying dynamics of communication always stands at the beginning or at the end of each violent conflict. Nowadays, however, the spatial reach of modern communication means is global and therefore also conflict potentials and front lines are coming up that may become global in reach. The growing importance of modern communication means in our daily lives calls for a shift of our attention in scientific conflict research and in political conflict management from primarily physical "battle fields" to virtual communication and "conflict spaces".

According to Professor Rothfuss in modernity humanity faces a technology dilemma: "We can exchange with one another more easily on a global scale, but are we morally prepared?" In present times the challenge of conflictive virtual communication is especially big between the so-called "Muslim" and "Western" world. At the University of Vienna over 6.000 Islamist hate

⁶Form A Shield Of Protection For Churches on Sunday, Muslim Brothers. MuslimsAgainstTerror.com. URL: <http://muslimsagainstterror.com/form-a-shield-of-protection-for-churches-on-sunday-muslim-brothers/>

instigating web videos have been collected and analyzed within the “Jihadism online” project. Often they make reference to the Holy Book of the Quran which in 164 verses underpins the faithful Muslim’s duty to support Jihad.

Professor Rothfuss stressed that the present and future challenge to secure peaceful intercultural and inter-religious coexistence on a local and global level calls for a strict containment of cyber-extremism but also for a transformation of inter-cultural communication to promote peace across “borders in minds”. Among the hard measures should be a more effective monitoring to detect critical organizations and initiatives early enough to prevent later real terrorist attacks. Internationally binding rules should be established to ban at least public movies and music titles with hate propagandistic content against any specific group.

In his presentation Professor Rothfuss underlined that the EU and other international organizations should provide financial resources for the promotion of cross-cultural exchange and cooperation. After World War II it proved to be a very effective instrument to promote long-lasting peace and integration within Europe through intensive student and citizen exchange across cultural and national borders and across “borders in minds”, so hurtfully perceived by European citizens in the first half of the twentieth century. Professor Rothfuss concluded his presentation with an inspiring citizen’s online initiative against warmongering: “Iranians, we love you!” (URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYjuUoEivbE>).

Summary Schirmmacher

Prof. Dr. Christine Schirmmacher

Prof. Dr. Christine Schirmmacher, a scholar of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn, focused her contribution on the spreading of worldviews, religious and political opinions through the medium of the internet. She explained the impact of this tool on the Muslim community since the internet for the first time in history creates a worldwide „ummah“ (Muslim community) and connects its members from the island of Java/Indonesia to the mosques in Canada or the Sufi groups in Mali.

Prof Schirmmacher spoke about the possibilities to use the internet within the Muslim community as a tool to either advertise religious freedom, human rights and peace between the different peoples and religions or mistrust, hatred and extremism. Both happens at the same time.

Schirmmacher chose two examples of Muslim theologians with a worldwide impact in order to illustrate positive as well as dangerous developments: Yusuf al-Qaradawi (born 1926) may be the most famous and well-known Muslim scholar of today. He has written about 130 books, countless pamphlets, sermons, fatwas (legal opinions) and articles. Being closely connected with the religious-political organisation of the Muslim brotherhood for decades, he is heading several international Muslim associations and has his hand in more than one financial and political body. He is on one side a classical scholar of Islam who has studied at the university of al-Azhar in Cairo and on the other side is advocating jihad, suicide attacks in Israel, the beating of wives in cases of their disobedience. He is also fiercely promoting to behead those who leave Islam and become converts to another religion. As he is also in charge of three websites, al-Qaradawi has a lot of opportunities to spread his extremist ideas to the worldwide Muslim community, whereas in former centuries a preacher and scholar like him would have been limited with his influence to a much smaller audience, mostly people who would have attended his friday sermons.

The second and very different example chosen by Prof. Schirmmacher is Abdullah Saeed (born 1960), who is also a scholar of Islam with a classical Islamic education and worldwide influence. He was born in the Maldives and has been educated in Pakistan and Saudi-Arabia. Today, he is Prof. of Islamic Studies in Melbourne/Australia. Abdullah Saeed is continuously advocating peace and reconciliation between different people groups, religions and nations by respectfully developing concepts of peaceful coexistence. Abdullah Saeed has written and edited about 20 books, numerous articles and speeches and has been asked to give a great number of contributions to international conferences. The internet gives him who is meanwhile a well-known Muslim advocate of complete religious freedom for adherents of any religion a much wider audience than he would have had in former years. Abdullah Saeed is not only constantly advertising his progressive views on Islam as the religion of mutual respect through his books and writings but also through audio and video clips which he recently started to make available through the internet. Abdullah Saeed thus becomes a worldwide ambassador of peace, freedom and human rights.

IIRF Reports (in English language):

Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2012: Th. Schirrmacher, The Situation of Christians and Muslims according to the Pew Forum's "Global Restrictions on Religion"

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Vol. 1, No. 4, April 2012: World Evangelical Alliance, Universal Periodic Review of Sri Lanka: 14th session of the UPR Working Group

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1. Jahrgang, Nr. 2, Januar 2012: Th. Schirrmacher, Verfolgung und Diskriminierung von Christen im 21. Jahrhundert

1. Jahrgang, Nr. 3, März 2012: Martin Baldermann, Die Berichterstattung der taz (Die Tageszeitung) in Bezug auf Christentum und Islam

1. Jahrgang, Nr. 4, April 2012: Th. Schirrmacher, Der japanische Yasukunikult – Soldaten als Märtyrer?

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