

Uniting in advocacy: Reflections on the Schwäbisch-Gmünd Congress 2009

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Abstract

Ten human rights organisations and Christian mission agencies met in Schwäbisch-Gmünd/Germany for a congress "Remember the martyrs - persecution of Christians today". For Germany this was unprecedented and it has succeeded in uniting mainly evangelical Christians in advocacy. The participants issued a call, addressed to the German government, to maintain and strengthen religious freedom in foreign policy. The call is predominantly positive and affirmative rather than demanding. The congress indicates that German evangelicals are starting to take an increasing number of political concerns seriously. Political initiatives developed in American evangelicalism are being contextually emulated in Germany.

Keywords congress, advocacy, declaration, policy making, evangelicals.

Ten human rights organisations and Christian mission agencies met in Schwäbisch-Gmünd/Germany for a congress "Remember the martyrs – persecution of Christians today" on 22-25 November 2009.¹ It was

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¹ The organisations: Hilfsaktion Märtyrerkirche (HMK), Open Doors (OD), Licht

organised by the Christian Conference Centre Schönblick and the news agency of the German Evangelical Alliance (*idea*). The impulse for the congress had initially been given by Dr Rolf Sauerzapf and Pastor Manfred Müller, the chair and the leader of Hilfsaktion Märtyrerkirche (HMK, German branch of Voice of the Martyrs).

More than 200 people from different denominational backgrounds from all over Germany gathered to reflect on the persecuted church around the world. The organisers were able to recruit a good number of highly qualified speakers, like Prof Thomas Schirmacher, Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, Rev Dr Richard Howell, General Secretary of the Asian Evangelical Alliance and the Evangelical Fellowship of India, Tony Lambert, a former British diplomat in Beijing, and Günter Nooke, Commissioner for Human Rights of the German Government.² Patron of the congress was the Bishop of the Protestant Church in Württemberg, Dr. Frank July. In his short written word of welcome he criticised the media for their indifference to religious persecution which has led to ignorance on this matter as evidenced by their scandalous equating of Christian martyrs to suicide bombers. But politicians took note of the congress as evidenced by the two-page letter of greeting by Volker Kauder, the chairperson of the parliamentary group of the ruling conservative party CDU/CSU. Among other things he wrote: “It is a call to action especially for us as Christians when we hear how Christian brothers and sisters are suffering. We are one with them in Christ.” Unfortunately the inclusion of catholic organisations in the planning of the congress had not been considered timely enough to make it feasible. While a number of catholic Christians active in advocacy for persecuted Christians in different organisations and in their own churches were among the participants, no roman-catholic organisations were among those officially represented. Kuno Kallnbach, one of the congress

im Osten (LiO), Evangelische Karmelmission, Religious Liberty Commission of the German Evangelical Alliance (AKREF), Christian Media Association (kep), Christian Solidarity International (CSI), Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), International Society for Human Rights (IGFM), International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF).

² Audio recordings of the presentations are available for order from Haus Schönblick: Tel. +49-7171-97070, E-mail: kontakt@schoenblick-info.de.

organisers, suggested that more efforts should be made to encourage the attendance of catholic groups in the future.

1. More freedom of choice - more persecution

In his opening keynote address Prof Thomas Schirrmacher reported on the current status of the struggle for religious freedom around the world. According to his observation, the efforts to defend religious freedom are more successful than in former years, because politicians and the worldwide community are now viewing religious freedom as an important issue. Schirrmacher maintains: “The quest for religious freedom is separate from the question of truth or the true religion. We do not defend the right of others to have their own religion because we think they are right in it, but because we respect the right of human beings to choose the fundamental orientation of their own lives.”

Globalisation has indeed increased the importance of the issue of religious liberty. Schirrmacher's claims are supported by what Peter Berger, sociologist of religion, stated for the Western world as early as the 1980s. And this is true today even on a global level. More and more people have access to information about other religions. Almost everybody is able to know that his or her inherited religion or tradition is not unique. There is a choice – a moment of freedom. More people will change their religious beliefs – and as an accompanying phenomenon there will be more efforts to hinder that.

Günter Nooke, Commissioner for Human Rights, emphasised at the congress that according to all international conventions religion is not a private matter. There exists a right to practise one's religion in public. “It may be unwise and inadequate to speak about your Christian faith in public in Islamic countries, e. g. in Yemen. But this still does not put in the wrong those who claim this elementary human right for themselves.” Mr Nooke had been part of a church-based opposition group in former East Germany and experienced discrimination there. He laments the lack of understanding in the West concerning religion. “Hardly anyone seems to deem important enough the defence of the right to freedom of belief in its full extent and to be willing to risk major conflicts for it.”

Field reports and podium discussions gave an impression of the current situation of persecuted Christians. The audience heard eye

witness reports from India, Nigeria, Indonesia, China, Sudan, Pakistan and Iraq. The reports showed the whole variety of dangers which Christians are facing, from defamation to discrimination, culminating in brutal persecution.

The representatives of the different countries explained what life looks like for Christians in their respective contexts, but they did not focus on the problems only. In some countries there seems to be a huge interest in the Christian faith – in spite of or maybe because of persecution. Projects to aid affected Christians were presented. At an open discussion about the situation in China, different perspectives of the current situation became obvious. While Tony Lambert from OMF and Konrad Brandt (Marburg Mission/ China Partners) underlined the positive development in religious policy during the past twenty years, the CEO of Open Doors Germany, Markus Rode, emphasised how various unregistered churches in particular still have to live with reprisals.

2. A resolution focusing on government policy

The congress issued a call for religious freedom which mainly addresses the German government. It will be forwarded via the Commissioner of the Council of Protestant Churches in Germany to the federal government and also sent to all members of parliament, to government ministries and various church bodies like the World Council of Churches. The participants of the congress unanimously agreed that “the protection of religious freedom is essential for living together in human dignity and peaceful co-existence of nations.”

The call is predominantly positive and affirmative rather than demanding. In five affirmations the participants of the congress express their appreciation to the Federal Government for having made religious freedom an important issue in recent years. A resolution of the parliament in 2007 ‘on solidarity with persecuted Christians and other persecuted minorities’ is praised as “the only document of its kind worldwide.” The endorsement of the issue in the coalition agreement of the new government is equally lauded, as it promises to lobby continually for religious freedom internationally and to pay particular attention to the situation of Christian minorities. The affirmations are combined with the expectation that good practice is maintained and efforts are increased.

Furthermore, the congress “positions” itself broadly and in a non-sectarian manner by emphasising its solidarity with all persecuted Christians and respect for the different cultures that have developed from various religions. The importance of “unrestricted liberty to change one’s religious adherence” is particularly emphasised, not only as a position but also in the closing appeals.

The appeals to government are focusing on three specific issues: The call on the government to increase their efforts to improve the human rights situation internationally and to defend the right of conversion to Christianity or any other religion without jeopardy. Secondly, the Human Rights Report of the government should include documentation on the right to conversion and the violations thereof. Finally it is advised to split the Human rights report in order to give religious freedom more space in a separate report, following the example of the United States.

The call was drawn up in consultation with sympathetic politicians, with consideration of how best to assist them. Great effort was taken to focus on realistic and relevant issues. Religious freedom experts and Christian media representatives had been consulted as well as all the organisations involved. How was it received? Human Rights Commissioner Nooke welcomed the call at the ensuing press conference and expressed his hope that it would strengthen the work of the government. Dr Christof Sauer, Co-Director of the IIRF, expressly praised the Schwäbisch-Gmünd Call: “Such differentiated and specific suggestions are rarely made.” In my opinion the resolution has found the right balance between respectful address and challenge. It does not contain unrealistic demands nor self-righteous allegations. As it is non-partisan, the resolution has the potential to be read and used by representatives of different political parties. The advantage of an alliance of different organisations raising their united voice in a respectful, clear and comprehensible way is obvious. Rarely does a politician use a statement or publication of one of the Christian organisations as they are deemed unsuitable for the political arena or more often than not, not sufficiently professional. The collaboration issue was emphasised by CDU/CSU parliamentary chair Kauder: “I noticed with delight that your conference rests on the basis of an alliance of different organisations. I think this co-operation is very important in order for your concern to be heard and your task to be accomplished successfully.”

3. Contributions to advocacy

Examining the surge in the United States of America in advocacy for international religious freedom in the 1990s, the political scientist Allen Hertzke claims: “The new faith-based movement is filling a void in human rights advocacy, raising issues previously slighted – or insufficiently pressed – by secular groups, the prestige press, and the foreign-policy establishment” (Hertzke 2004:4). Let me examine to what degree that might apply to Germany, too. Assessing the situation in Germany at the opening of the congress, the chief editor of the protestant news agency *idea*, Helmut Matthies, maintained that there could be no better point in time to fight for religious freedom, firstly, because Germany has been a truly free country for twenty years now, due to its reunification and secondly, there is more interest in the issue of religious liberty both among the public and the press than ever before.

3.1 Advocacy in the German context

In what wider context of key Christian advocacy efforts for religious freedom was the congress positioned? Initially it was mainly a domain of the Evangelical Alliance. From its outset in the seventies, the news agency of the Evangelical Alliance has emphasised reporting on the persecution of Christians. During the last several years, in its widely circulated magazine *Idea Spektrum*, the Alliance has been regularly presenting a Christian ‘prisoner of the month’ together with a call for petitions.³ Days of prayer for persecuted Christians, organised by different churches, are growing in importance. These days of prayer usually draw their information from material provided by the Evangelical Alliance for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. In 2000, the German Evangelical Alliance has established its own national Religious Liberty Commission (AKREF) which since then has been compiling an extensive news bulletin and prayer requests every other week as well as an annual yearbook on the persecution of Christians today (AKREF 2009). This book which is published conjointly with *idea* and others, has become a sought-after source in many churches for preparing talks and meetings (Klingberg, Schirmacher, Kubsch 2009).

³ www.idea.de.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg was the first mainline protestant church in Germany to introduce its own special day of prayer for persecuted Christians on 26 December of each year since 2007.⁴ A few years earlier, the synod of this church started receiving annual reports about the situation of persecuted Christians around the world. The impetus thus provided has now reached national level with the Union of Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD), which represents the vast majority of protestant Christians in Germany. For the first time it has recommended its own ‘Day of Persecuted Christians’ to its member churches to take place on 28 February 2010.⁵ Numerous outspoken public statements advocating religious freedom internationally have been made by the former Chair of the Council of Protestant Churches of Germany, Bishop Wolfgang Huber (2009), and by his recently elected successor, Bishop Margot Käßmann. Their statements indicate that persecuted Christians have become an important issue even on the highest level of church leadership. On the occasion of the presentation of the newly elected Council of the Synod of the EKD to representatives of society and politics in the national capital Berlin, Käßmann took the opportunity to speak about human rights, focusing on religious freedom nationally and internationally (Käßmann 2009). However, she did not refer to the Schwäbisch-Gmünd Congress, which had ended a week before, but to the 61st anniversary of the United Nations International Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December.

3.2 Goals of the congress

Returning to the contributions of the congress on advocacy, I have tried to ascertain, by interviewing its organisers, the goals of the congress. The stated goals were:

- to organise a meeting of as many German organisations as possible that are already involved in working for the persecuted church in order to facilitate mutual exchange
- to supply the participants with comprehensive information about persecuted Christians

⁴ This is St. Stephen’s Day for which the Roman-Catholic conference of Bishops in Germany had issued prayer information annually for a number of years.

⁵ Before, it appears that beside individual appeals for prayer for major crisis situations, the EKD had only published a prayer or information brochure on “suffering of Christians in the world” (1977 and 1988) or “religious freedom under threat” (EKD 2003) every decade or so.

- to create a platform for the networking of participants and organisers in order for them to work more effectively for the persecuted church in the future
- to raise awareness in the churches of the issue of the persecution of Christians
- to send a message to policy makers in order for them to respond, consider the importance of the issue and offer adequate help.

While some of the outcomes have already been discussed earlier in this article, I will now focus mainly on the achievement of cooperation among Christians and the effects on the media.

3.3 Achieving co-operation

In my view it is a very positive sign that evangelicals, mainstream protestants and (secular) political representatives were willing and able to work together for the issue of religious freedom. Whatever their theological or ideological backgrounds might be, they all had a similar understanding of religious freedom as a right of every individual. I concur with Allen Hertzke (2004:29): “That is why religious mobilization is potentially so momentous; it produces a new human rights constituency acknowledged and even celebrated by secular activists.” As mentioned earlier, there were no catholic organizations present, but neither were any representatives of the protestant free churches to be found. When Thomas Schirmacher was asked to express his opinion on the potential impact of the congress, he suggested that the congress might exert a greater influence on politicians, like members of the German parliament, than on the churches.

“The cooperation of different organisations in a broad coalition, that places its common concern in the foreground and not the self-portrayal of any single organization,” is what Paul Murdoch, chair of AKREF, deems to be the most important signal of the congress. “It is important to raise awareness of persecution among all Christians.” He hopes that the participants will work towards this goal in their own individual groups, e.g. in prayer meetings in their home churches. He is confident that this topic will be an issue in politics. He was encouraged by earlier discussions he held with politicians, some of which took place even at the German Chancellor's office, and he would recommend to Evangelical Alliances in other countries to hold such congresses as well.

The congress 'Persecution of Christians today' with such a broad platform of organisers has been a unique event in Germany. Both Murdoch and Schirmacher agree that they cannot remember a congress with such a broad orientation. In the 1970s the journalist Heinz Matthias organised a number of congresses in Germany on the situation of the Christians in the East. The intention of those congresses focused on helping Christians behind the iron curtain, not globally, and there was no broad coalition of agencies (Reimer 1979:335-336).

Schirmacher stated after the congress: We have different traditions, a different history, different theological dispositions and also different approaches in our work for persecuted Christians. But in our public appearance we need to endeavour to speak with one voice. We are much better perceived by politicians and churches if we act in conjunction rather than as individual agencies. Equally, the reservations against individual agencies diminish when they are part of a large alliance of initiatives."

3.4 Between media respect and silence

What effects did the congress have on the media? The press was represented by only two local newspapers (Rems-Zeitung, Gmünder Tagespost), a countrywide conservative weekly newspaper (Junge Freiheit), the news agency of the Evangelical Alliance and the Protestant Press Service EPD. The local television broadcast SWR reported in a 30 second feature, while Christian television news by *idea* gave it 3 minutes of airtime. Christian television ERF videotaped the presentations in view of future broadcasts on its own programmes and by Bible TV. All press reports about the congress and its concerns were positive. The congress, mainly organised by evangelicals, was well received by those who did report, which was partly due to the presence of Human Rights Commissioner Günter Nooke, a former dissident of East Germany, and the mayor's personal welcome address to the participants.

It needs to be noted that a congress trying to provide the best available information on the persecution of Christians was not picked up by the opinion-makers among the media. However, shortly afterwards a rash statement by a foreign politician against Europe and Christians led to widespread reporting about the situation of Christians in his country and other difficult situations. As a surprising response to the reaction of Turkey's prime minister Erdogan to the ban by popular vote on the building of new minarets in Switzerland, in which he

called Europe and Christians fascists, dozens of articles have appeared on the situation of Christians in Turkey and other countries. The most popular BILD-newspaper featured Thomas Schirmacher as an expert on religious freedom in Islamic countries (2 December)⁶ and RTL Television came to interview him. While the mainstream media no longer ignore the persecution of Christians, it is still under-reported (cf. Hertzke 2009). It seems to feature mainly in connection with highly emotive issues or crises concerning Germans rather than in regular coverage on religious persecution itself.

3.5 A novelty in German-speaking Europe

Finally, I would like to ask how unique this congress was in the international perspective. Almost 14 years earlier, in the United States, Freedom House had hosted a conference of 100 key US Christian leaders and activists on ‘the global persecution of Christians’ on 23 January 1996 in Washington DC. At this conference the National Association of Evangelicals released an unprecedented and forceful ‘Statement of Conscience’ and call to action, addressed to the government. This was then endorsed or commended by some major denominations (Shea 1996). This resulted on the one hand in the annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church which commenced in December 1996. On the other hand it eventually gave more prominence to religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy by instituting annual Religious Freedom Reports by the State Department, the appointment of an Ambassador for Religious Freedom and a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, among other measures (Shea 2008, Hertzke 2004).

In the United Kingdom, a ‘Christian Forum in Support of Persecuted Religious Minorities Worldwide’ was launched at a London conference on 20 July 2002, which attracted nearly 200 participants.⁷ Backing for the group has come from a range of mission agencies and human rights groups. The mandate of the forum is to facilitate the sharing of information, raise awareness within church and society, respond appropriately and encourage prayer and action. Bishop Mano Rumalshah of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was the original visionary for the Forum. After 2003 no trace of activities of the forum can be found on the internet.

⁶ <http://tinyurl.com/BILD-TS>.

⁷ <http://tinyurl.com/UK-Forum>.

On an international level, the 'Religious Liberty Partnership' emerged as a Christian umbrella body in 2007 for the purpose of encouraging and nurturing partnership and collaboration among international Christian organisations focused on religious liberty. More specifically they endeavour to work together in addressing advocacy and in raising global awareness of religious persecution (RLP 2009:7).

From an international perspective the Schwäbisch Gmünd congress was not unique as there are similar initiatives in other nations. However, for Germany it was a novelty. Similar initiatives have had an impact on the foreign policy of the United States, and forums of agencies were formed in the UK and internationally.

Closer to home, some activities can be registered in Switzerland, which are remotely comparable. The reformed churches of some German speaking cantons in Switzerland together with Mission 21 (former Basel Mission) have launched a two year campaign on 'Religion and Freedom and Dignity.'⁸ This has resulted in a conference for church members on 'What to do when people are discriminated against for their faith' on 24 October 2009 in Lenzburg, Aargau⁹. An 'historical and theological day of study' in Basel on 'Religious minorities under pressure - insights from mission theology' in Basel on 29 May 2010 is also being prepared. The project aims at sensitising churches to the issue and at funding development projects and dialogue activities as possible remedies for religious conflict caused by social injustice. This is not a nationwide campaign including more than one agency but the initiative of the Aargau Reformed Synod which has commendably looked for and found some partners for synergy. However, the Reformed Synod in the Canton of Zürich is pursuing its own project.

4. German evangelicals taking political concerns seriously

The Schwäbisch Gmünd Congress on religious persecution and liberty shows that political initiatives developed in American Evangelicalism are being contextualised in Germany. This is remarkable in view of the

⁸ <http://tinyurl.com/m21-freiheit>; home: www.mission-21.org.

⁹ <http://tinyurl.com/Ref-AG-CH>; home: www.ref-ag.ch.

particular difficulties German evangelicals have with their pietist tradition of being the ‘quiet ones in the land’ who are concerned with salvation while at the same time ignoring social and political concerns (cf. Hausin 1999). However, this attitude has been true of only some of the evangelicals both past and present. Often a mark of evangelical piety is the wavering between being open towards the world and turning away from the world, the manoeuvring between the church and the world, and even between changing the world and avoiding it altogether. As long as certain principles of humanitarianism, justice and freedom are maintained, they stay silent. Wherever those principles are abused, evangelicals are suddenly able to criticise radically. This is especially true in cases where governments do not allow religious liberty.

Evangelical spirituality does not automatically signify political engagement or disengagement. Both approaches are options that are used, depending on the circumstances. The ways in which German evangelicals are active are changing. The reality that one has to join forces in order to reach certain political goals caused them to seek a consensus among themselves. This is the only way they can make themselves heard. Complaints alone will not move political authorities. German evangelicals have suffered this reality in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the end of the 1980s a number of explicitly political organisations were founded by evangelicals.¹⁰ This shows the growing awareness that in a pluralistic democracy things can be achieved only by means of powerful tools. At the same time we can sense a change of awareness among evangelicals who are usually in danger of acquiescing to the political status quo, as long as it does not interfere with their private practice of religion. Their political and societal initiatives in instances where foundational structures or numerous individuals are affected, show that they consider society to be malleable. Since the end of the 80s, appeals and demonstrations against certain political developments have been organised by evangelicals. As Hertzke (2004:29) says: “Movements need foot soldiers armed with information and a willingness to contact their

¹⁰ Aktion ‘Die Wende’ in 1983 to support a moral regeneration, Christliches Forum in 1987 against the de-christianisation of Germany, Aktion Christliche Gesellschaft for calvinist inspired politics in Germany, AKREF in 2000 for religious liberty, Commission on politics of the German Evangelical Alliance in 2003, Micha initiative of the German Evangelical Alliance.

elected representatives, donate money, and enlist others in the cause.” Therefore idea chief editor Helmut Matthies hopes the congress will activate churches in prayer and protest.

After having dealt only with ‘easy topics’ like abortion or family politics for a long period, with the topic of religious liberty evangelicals are now opening up for themselves a whole field that actually corresponds with their tradition. Shortly after the founding of the Evangelical Alliance, its representatives travelled to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire in order to achieve religious liberty for the Christians there. It should be noted that they did not do this for the almost non-existent protestants, but for the orthodox Christians. In Germany, the Alliance fought for the rights of the free churches that in some respect had lesser rights and societal standing than the members of the protestant state churches (Voigt 2004:37-74). Lobbying for religious liberty is not a strange thing for evangelicals to do. And it comes as no surprise that in 1663 a ‘proto-evangelical’ like Roger Williams, the founder of the Federal State of Rhode Island, for the first time advanced a constitution that ensured “full liberty in religious concernments” (Gaustadt 1974:66). “Our kind of mission presupposes that others are able to represent their religious convictions as well” explains Thomas Schirmacher.

Through their international connections, evangelicals are in direct contact with persecuted Christians. By their initiative to help their brothers and sisters, their eyes were opened anew to the meaning of religious liberty. It is remarkable that their dedication for the persecuted does not stop with their own brand of religious adherence. Evangelicals today are among the strongest advocates of religious liberty ever. Their view of mankind as created by God and as responsible people presupposes that each individual adopts a faith in his or her heart – even if it is a wrong one. With their efforts for a general liberty of religion evangelicals opt out of a simple political right or left classification.

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