

**Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Seelsorge und Beratung**  
*Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling – SIPCC*

**Symposium and Celebration**

*28 November, 2015*  
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***Discovering God's Presence with Others***

***Theological inspirations in intercultural and interreligious  
care and counselling***

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The theme of this Symposium has inspired me with five theological insights on viewing the other from a Christian perspective, and what this means to me as a Christian.

***First Theological Inspiration: Discovering God – the Trinity***

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At a symposium of the World Council of Churches at the time of the Decade to Overcome Violence, an Orthodox representative critically reflected on the theology of Western European peace initiatives, saying: 'Where is the Holy Trinity in your theology?' Let me try to summarize his point very briefly. I am convinced that what he said about peace applies to pastoral care as well.

This Orthodox theologian criticized the Christocentrism of Western theology as he saw it exemplified in the debate on peace: as Western theology would have it, Christ comes into

this world, reconciles it, promises the Holy Spirit and returns to the Father. A clear, linear path, in various distinct stages.

In Orthodox theology, however, Trinitarian doctrine takes center stage, and one description of the Holy Trinity would be in terms of *perichoresis*, the eternal and dynamic connection and interaction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The perichoresis is like a dance, a giving and taking of space, an 'all-pervading unity in diversity'. No a streamlined one-way movement but rather a cheerful dancing togetherness. To be honest, I'd never expected such joyful dynamics in Orthodox theology and maybe that is why this description of God, the perichoresis, made such an impression on me.<sup>1</sup>

Now we are right in the theme of this symposium: 'Discovering God's presence with others'. For us as Christian theologians and Christian believers, the notion of 'the other' is an essential element in how we see God: God encounters himself as the Other, God has a self-differentiation, he is connected and yet different. In this perichoresis, man, as God's image and likeness, is connected with his/her God and with his/her neighbor, different and one, distinct and yet the same.

By the way, and contrary to the Orthodox theologian's claim, Western theology does feature a Trinitarian understanding of God. Jürgen Moltmann, in his Trinitarian thinking has taken up the concept of perichoresis. He notes: 'Meanwhile, there has been a renaissance of Trinitarian thinking in Western theology'<sup>2</sup>, and continues: 'The Trinitarian persons yield each other inviting spaces of movement, in which they can unfold their eternal vitality. [...] It is the power of perfect love which causes each person to go out in such a way as to be totally present in the others. Each of the Trinitarian persons is not only a person but also a dwelling-place for the other two.'<sup>3</sup> As the Early Church had formulated: 'unconfused and inseparable'. Jürgen Moltmann's conclusions open directly into our theme: 'I have called the unity of the Trinity an open, inviting unity and I have spoken out against picturing it as a triangle or a circle (a self-contained Trinity). The Trinity is invitingly open in the abundance of its love.'<sup>4</sup>

Gisbert Greshake comments<sup>5</sup>: 'One can only be a person in the full sense of the term by free and reciprocal recognition of the other, in being *with* and *for* each other. The other is an essential element of personhood. In others and through others I win myself. This is precisely what can be 'read' in the Trinitarian God, in fact this insight is a consequence of faith in the triune God. If the divine life realizes itself in the interchange between the three different persons of Father, Son and Spirit, then this means: unity and multiplicity, unity and diversity, unity and otherness are equally original, equally important, first and foremost in God, but then – as a result of the [...] analogy between God and man – also with us. The

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<sup>1</sup> Internationale Ökumenische Erklärung zum gerechten Frieden. Erster Entwurf, 2009 (ACK), S. 14

<sup>2</sup> S. Jürgen Moltmann, Gott der Vater im Leben der Heiligen Dreieinigkeit, in: International Journey of Orthodox Theology 2010, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Gisbert Greshake, Menschsein im Bild des dreieinen Gottes (An den drei-einen Gott glauben) Freiburg 1998, p. 41-46.

consequences of this insight are not exactly self-evident. [...] Almost universally, unity and harmony [...] are valued higher than [...] difference. [...] A view of man that is based on the triune God results in a different praxis, in which the Other as Other, with his/her otherness is essential and indispensable.'

The guidelines of the Evangelical Church in Rhineland, titled *Abraham and the belief in one God* (2009), develop these notions in view of the encounters with other religions. They have a direct impact on the meeting with adherents of other religions, without neglecting the differences. This is not simply tolerance, but a part of Christian theology. In 2012 the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland has stated: 'The adherent of another religion is considered a unique person, entitled to protection and recognition, even if his/her religious beliefs cannot be shared.'<sup>6</sup>

### ***Second Theological Inspiration: Discovering the Others – Biblical Traces***

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The Trinitarian understanding of God and the attitude of respect towards others that comes with it can be found in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testament. It is even more than respect, it is the experience of discovering God's presence in and through other human beings. Tellingly, to mention only a few examples, it is Pharaoh who points out to Abraham that God is on Sarah's side, and that God expects from Abraham a certain behavior towards his wife. Jesus mentions a Samaritan as an example, not for some side issue, but for the fulfillment of the highest commandment (Luke 10)! To his own amazement, in the encounter with the captain in Capernaum, Jesus says: 'I have not found such great faith in Israel' (Matthew 8:10), adding: 'Many will come from east and west to sit with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven.'

It is not easy to fully comprehend this breadth of God, even for Jesus himself: the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15) argues with Jesus for her daughter's sake, for God's presence in their lives: she begs for the crumbs that fall off the table as if she were a dog. What happens then is, in fact, a theological miracle: 'The religious outsider has caused Jesus to rethink the reach of God's mercy even beyond the people of Israel.'<sup>7</sup> When Peter, in the story of the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), is urged to give up his previous religious behavior and knowledge, he exclaims: Oh no, Lord, I've never eaten something unclean.

Putting it casually, these biblical stories say: If you want to discover the presence of God, never say never and never say always. I never knew – I've always known: both are statements that may quickly fail in the encounter with the living God. The Bible makes it clear to me that God's capabilities are greater than my own.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare „Religionsfreiheit gestalten. Zum öffentlichen Auftrag der Religionen im weltanschaulich neutralen Staat heute“, Handreichung der EKIR 2012, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Weggemeinschaft und Zeugnis im Dialog mit Muslimen, Arbeitshilfe der EKIR 2015, p. 11.

### *Third Theological Inspiration: Our Own Limitations – God Discovers Me*

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This summer, seventeen ecumenical guests from the partner churches of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland made an ecumenical visit to our church. In the final report, after ten fruitful and inspiring days, they noted: ‘The world is big. The problems are manifold. But God is bigger, he speaks many languages and is rich in council. That’s why we can trust more and need to plan less.’<sup>8</sup> Hardly a sentence has been cited more often in the last few months, in a church that is in the midst of a structural change and that of course has to act responsibly and plan. ‘That’s why we can trust more.’ In the encounter with these critical yet solidary visitors I could grasp the immediate reality of the biblical phrase which I, like so many pastors, often use at the end of a sermon: ‘The peace of God, which surpasses all our understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’

‘Which surpasses all our understanding!’ In encounters, I hear questions that I myself cannot ask, I find consolation that I could not offer to myself. In other, strange words, I hear the familiar message in a new way. In the *Ecumenical Prayer Book* of the World Council of Churches, it says in the Preface: ‘Prayer can be risky, especially in an ecumenical context. In our own tradition we may have learned to tame our experience with God. We have found ways to make God harmless and keep him from exposing our fragmentary lives and transforming our petrified faiths. Prayers from another tradition are therefore a real gift. God uses the words of others to open us to his Spirit, who transforms us and renews us to wonderful people who encounter God in new ways.’<sup>9</sup>

Many who have experiences in intercultural and interreligious encounters can confirm this. Let me tell you a story that happened in the early summer of this year. I think it is typical of the faith of many Christian pastors. We often go out – at least I do – to accompany other people, to help them, or to teach. But discovering God is not a one-way street. God discovers me through others.

With a group of Bishops of the United Evangelical Mission I went to Israel and Palestine. The aim was to make Christian spiritual leaders from Asia and Africa acquainted with the Christian-Jewish dialogue which has been going on for a long time in our Evangelical Church of the Rhineland. Since 1980, this dialogue has been fundamentally important in the process of changing and re-defining the relation between our Church and the people of Israel. In many former mission churches, however, Christian-Jewish dialogue is unknown. Their theologies reflect the thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century missions, and have currently adopted the critical attitude of the World Council of Churches towards Israel as the occupying power of Palestine.

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<sup>8</sup> Report of a Ecumenical Visit of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland 2015, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> In Gottes Hand. Gemeinsam beten für die Welt, Frankfurt am Main/Paderborn 2008, S. XI

It was a wonderful ecumenical experience, rejoicing in the land of Jesus, being happy for the Jews rushing for prayer at the Wailing Wall, meeting with Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank, and simply marveling at the great number of Jews that remain even after the Holocaust. We also were at Yad Vashem. Beside me Bishop Nathan from Rwanda, commented. 'Familiar pictures, similar to those we have seen in Rwanda,' he said as he stood in front of a picture of Lithuanians beating up Jews. 'Only with us it is worse, as we are one people, Rwandans against other Rwandans. We now have to live together, as victims and perpetrators.' I realized how difficult a visit to this museum must be for someone who has actually survived a genocide himself. We split up; here in Yad Vashem we all needed our own rhythm. At the end we met again. 'Barbara, how do you feel?' he asked. 'So many terrible things are said about the Germans here. That must be very hard for you.' I tell him that we grew up with the discussion about the Shoah and how our Church reopened itself to Israel and the Jews in the 1980's.

Months later, riding my bike alone, I suddenly recalled Nathan's question. Only then did I realise that he had not been seeking any explanations from me. He had been interested in how I felt. 'That must be very hard for you.' The simple question, 'How are you?' now touched me at a depth which I had not anticipated. I felt the bishop's sadness, his compassion, his willingness to comfort me. The other, the stranger, whom I accompanied at Yad Vashem, was in fact accompanying me.

### *Fourth Theological Inspiration: Exploring the Limitations of the Others – God's Greatness*

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In this section, I would like to make three very different points.

I.

There is a little story about the abbot of a Benedictine monastery. Each and every day he felt exasperated by one of his brethren. Yet each and every day he thanked God that this particular brother lived in his monastery. When the monks asked him why he thanked God exactly for the brother who made his life so hard, he said: 'This brother teaches me how much greater God's love is than my love and than I can imagine.'

What this story tells us is that difference is not always pleasurable or theologically edifying. Cultural and religious differences can be highly annoying. Today, tensions are sometimes rising high in many refugee camps in this country – and it still has to be determined what is due to past trauma and present conditions, and what is caused by cultural and religious diversity. During my time in Frankfurt, my office was in a building which also housed the Association of Binational Families and Relationships. Sometimes, staff members would tell me that they were not only dealing with questions of residency and naturalization. In fact, the most frequent counseling issues were with couples that had held too optimistic and

idealistic views of the binationality in their relationships. Also at the bedside, in prisons, in homes for elderly people, in psychosocial counseling or counseling of existential needs, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and irritation.

II.

Taking this one step further: I am definitely not going to accept or approve of everything I'm confronted with in the exchange with others. In the presence of God, I will discover where disagreement and dispute are due. Gender relations, different sexual orientations, exorcism, and the Prosperity Gospel, to mention some examples, these are issues on which widely diverging views exist, even within the Christian faith. But here too, the power of perichoresis is helping us, as it brings the rigid fronts into motion, leaving space and taking space, creating a 'safe space', as it is called in the ecumenical movement.

III.

There are people who just cannot wait, and do not want to wait, until I have properly figured out the will of God. Syrian refugees. The young man from Cote d'Ivoire, trying to escape from the trap of poverty. The people of West Papua, whose forests are exploited through mining of raw materials. The dump kids of the Philippines. They invade my life, the limitations of their opportunities in life leave me only little time. 'Today, if you hear my voice,' says Jesus. They take me into a dance of life, they shake up my thoughts. God knows I cannot remain as I am in the encounter with others. They change me.

### ***Fifth Theological Inspiration: Pastoral Care and Counseling as the Miners' Canary of Theology***

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In recent years, the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland has issued numerous publications on intercultural and interreligious relations, testifying to the great dynamics of this area. This year alone saw the publication of three study guides, which deal with the theme of our symposium.

The first of these guides is titled *Living in Diversity. A Guide for Intercultural Overtures in the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland*.<sup>10</sup> In wordings typical of German churches, it says (on pastoral care in prisons): 'When dealing with people of different nationalities and languages, (sub-)cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations, pastoral caregivers need to know about each client's cultural affiliation, about their values and moral convictions, about the religious and spiritual belonging in their traditions and their rituals and about their specific religious attitude and expressions.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In Vielfalt leben. Werkbuch für Interkulturelle Öffnung in der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland, EKIR 2015

<sup>11</sup> From: Leitlinien für die Evangelische Gefängnisseelsorge in Deutschland, Hannover 2009, citation from: In Vielfalt leben, EKIR 2015, p. 78.

The second guide, *Companionship and Testimony in Dialogue with Muslims*,<sup>12</sup> has been the subject of fierce debate ever since its publication – particularly in the conservative news magazine *Idea Spectrum*. On theological interreligious dialogue, the guide says: ‘In the theological dialogue with Islam, differences come to light that cannot be resolved. However, they can be made fruitful for mutual learning experiences about one’s own faith.’<sup>13</sup>

The third booklet is titled *Communities of Other Languages and Origins*.<sup>14</sup> It says: ‘Mutual curiosity and perception of differences also open up our view of how much the Gospel is embedded in the language and culture of the other people. On close scrutiny, much of what we thought be theological difference, appears to be cultural difference.’

All these guidelines and books are helpful and necessary, but they have limitations. I consider it my responsibility as an official of our Church to address these limitations, particularly when it comes to pastoral care and counseling.

In fact, I think that pastoral care and counseling is the miners’ canary of theology. As a miner’s daughter, I know the danger of what miners used to call ‘bad weather’. They took canaries down with them, and when the birds stopped singing, they would know there was too much carbon monoxide, and they would leave the pit. Canaries dropping from their perches would indicate that speed was crucial. Like a canary bird, pastoral care and counseling acts as an early-warning system, signaling when theological air is thin and faith’s breathing becomes hard.

Back in the eighties, in the town where I was a minister, three small children of a Turkish family lost their lives in a fire incident. I went to visit the family immediately, together with the head of the kindergarten. At the end of the visit I said: ‘In a Christian family, I would now pray.’ And before I could say anything more, the mother asked me to pray. It was only after the prayer that the real pastoral conversation started. We talked about their fear of being accused of neglect by their neighbors, about the question of their own failure, about the grief and the great financial damage caused by the fire. At that time, Christian-Muslim relations were uncharted territory in the Church, but experiences like this one led the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland in 1998 to issue the booklet: *Christians and Muslims Side by Side before the One God*.<sup>15</sup> It says: ‘Prayer to God is by no means an “instrument” of interreligious distinction or rejection. Rather it will open people again and again to the Word of God and to his guidance and spiritual correction.’<sup>16</sup>

Pastoral caregivers often work on the edges of human experience. They become aware of the limitations of theological arguments and definitions long before clerics and academics in their committees and offices do. They know when good theology has to change because

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<sup>12</sup> *Weggemeinschaft und Zeugnis im Dialog mit Muslimen*, EKIR 2015

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Gemeinden anderer Sprache und Herkunft*, EKIR und EKvW 2015, 2. Auflage

<sup>15</sup> *Christen und Muslime nebeneinander vor dem einen Gott. Zur Frage des gemeinsamen Betens. Orientierungshilfe der EKIR 1998*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

reality has changed and people have changed. 'According to Protestant belief, God himself is acting in his word. [...] One can already observe within the Bible and the Biblical canon itself how Biblical writers adopt and adapt earlier Biblical texts in a new way by setting (new and different) accents.'<sup>17</sup>

Let the miners heed the canary, let the Churches heed the pastoral caregivers. Your theological inspirations will bring the theology of the Church forward, taking space and leaving space, sidestepping, dancing and swirling, in pain and in joy – as the play of the Divine Holy Trinity, the play of God's image in his Presence.

*Translation: Arian Verheij*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 30.