

Who Reinhard von Kirchbach was; what his purpose was

(See the link “Tabellarischer Lebenslauf”)

(reworked in 2015, M.M.)

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Pioneer of conversation between the religions

For the *Evangelische Kirche* in Deutschland, Reinhard von Kirchbach became one of the pioneers of conversation between the religions. In the process he chose an independent, relatively lonely path along which he was able to open internal and external doors. From within his own faith and with the help of those whom he met he was able to approach the sources of faith of others on a profound level. Thus it came about that some Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims felt more intimate ties with him than they had with members of their own religion.

Among the Lutheran theologians of his church von Kirchbach was on the one hand considered a deserter; on the other, he always remained in contact with his bishops and colleagues in the *Nordelbische Kirche*. Some of them followed him and accompanied him on his journey willing to learn. Others distrusted what he did and said. Thus his concerns were taken up only to a limited extent in his lifetime.

For Reinhard von Kirchbach involvement in interreligious dialogue did not begin in the cradle, but in retrospect his career led him there with extraordinary consistency.

Background, education, theological training

Born in 1913 in Berlin, Reinhard von Kirchbach grew up in Dresden. His mother died when he was six. His father Arndt von Kirchbach was a soldier, served on the general staff in the First World War and in 1920 at the age of 35 began to study theology. When he married again in 1921, Esther von Kirchbach became Reynard’s second mother. A stepsister was added to his own sister, and soon there were five half-siblings, too. Esther von Kirchbach became well known as a result of church publications in the years before the Second World War, and recently she was commemorated by a postage stamp in the series “Women in German history”, (<http://www.esther-von-kirchbach.de/index.html>). Her stepson was able to pour out his heart to her, and she introduced him to Christian mysticism and to a living dialogue with Catholic Christians.

In his childhood Reinhard von Kirchbach was influenced by a variety of relationships with aristocratic families whose members held office in various types of public service in Saxony. Instead of becoming a forester as he had originally intended, he settled like his father on the study of theology, which, after semesters in Marburg and Tuebingen, he completed in 1939 with the primary examination in Leipzig. During the Nazi era his father was prominently engaged in the *Bekennende Kirche* as pastor in the *Sophienkirche* in Dresden and from 1936 as provost of Freiberg in Saxony. He

subsequently had to undergo brief imprisonment followed by a lengthy term of suspension. On the outbreak of war, he volunteered as an army chaplain, whilst Reinhard as a 26-year-old theology probationer volunteered for military service in the *Luftwaffe*.

Second World War

Reinhard von Kirchbach saw his great contribution to the war effort, for which he was highly decorated, as his soldierly duty. When, at the end of the war, his eyes were opened, he was tormented by the questions as to how he had allowed himself to be deceived and how he had been able to turn a blind eye to atrocities, which he witnessed from time to time. He occasionally refused to carry out barbarous orders, provided minor assistance to starving Russians or treated oppressed Jews with kindness, but these acts were later to become a source not of pride but of shame at his half-heartedness. Unless asked, he never allowed himself to speak of this phase of his life, and most of those around him also knew nothing about it. He detached himself fundamentally from military ideals and from the traditions of the aristocracy, which could have included him in upper class circles.

Husband, vicar, provost

While the war was still in progress, he married Margarete, nee *Graefin von Zech-Burkersroda*, a granddaughter of the former State Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg. This marriage, which produced six children, ended with her death in 1975. Reinhard von Kirchbach became a Lutheran minister in Schleswig-Holstein and worked from 1948 to 1976 in Luebeck, Schinkel, Gettorf and, as provost, in Schleswig. He spent his retirement in Altenhof near Eckernfoerde. In 1981 he married Benita, nee von Scharnweber, who died in 2008, ten years after his death.

Personal vocation

Without taking large amounts of time for his study, prayer and writing, Reinhard von Kirchbach was neither able nor willing to attend to his tasks as minister, pastor and teacher of religion to ever widening circles. Two spiritual experiences, the first in his early years and the second in his time in a prisoner of war camp in Egypt, prevented him from confining himself to the fulfilment of a church office in a conventional manner. He felt himself to have been called by God to serve the peoples of the earth. Only two years before he died he wrote about this: "Because God has called me and I have answered Him, my life is blessed by His mercy, by the patient working out of His purpose and by the power of His truth". And again : "As I hurtled helplessly towards an abyss of annihilation, I heard the voice of Jesus in my headlong fall, and just as irresistibly I was lifted up towards the glorious light out of which I had been called" (read in his book „Dialog aus Glauben“ P 257f.). From the silent seclusion of his study he followed his calling and dashed out on his search for the presence of God in the world. In this he was drawn along by a great inner restlessness and an even greater anticipation.

The journey to interreligious dialogue

His theological thinking became a path of continuous learning as he addressed earthly realities and God himself. He studied the works of great theologians such as Augustine, Luther, Kirkegaard, Barth and Kaesemann – and prayed. A new hunger for the knowledge of God awoke in him on a previously unfamiliar scale, when in 1957 his attention was drawn to the Jesuit theologian and palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin. As soon as they appeared, he now obtained and read every one of his books, which were published after his death; for it was here that he found theological and spiritual access to the theory of the evolution of life and also to a dialogue between the cultures of the whole of contemporary mankind.

He thus acquired more extensive literary access to modern natural scientific knowledge of the origin of the universe, the geological eras and the evolution of life, especially that of man – and prayed. In doing so, as he gathered information, he listened to the voice of Jesus and the voice of God. In his further studies he mastered mountains of comparative theological literature and investigated experiences of dialogue, such as those of Raimon Panikkar. He traced the first great conferences on religious dialogue in which Christians and churches took part and examined papers and reports on the foundations, methods and objectives of dialogue – and prayed. And in the end he put it all to the test and continued his studies by acquiring individual friends representing Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and for seventeen years, often on an annual basis, lived with them for three to six weeks at a time.

Prayer, understanding, writing

Reinhard von Kirchbach's theology can be described as a theology in prayer. He left us this in his writings. For whole decades there were matters on which he reflected and conclusions which he reached, as he prayed in the early morning hours. This continued both before, during and after the dialogue meetings, and he then put his thoughts on paper in language that was both consistent and poetic. He brought many of these texts together in little collections or more extensive booklets and gave them to his family and friends. These writings have been published in an edition of his works by the Traugott Bautz publishing-house after a first volume appeared in 2008 under the title: "Ich glaube den interreligiosen Dialog – Zugaenge zu Leben und Wirken des Wegbereiters Reinhard von Kirchbach" ("I believe in the interreligious dialogue – an approach to the pioneering life and work of Reinhard von Kirchbach"). In addition a volume containing his lectures is available; same a collection of his sermons in Schleswig. Many examples of his work are to be found on the internet via the website: www.reinhardvonkirchbach.de .

The project of interreligious dialogue

Reinhard's idea of a project for a living interreligious dialogue took shape in his mind with increasing clarity during his last years at work, but he was unable to realize them while still in the service of the church. Only when, in 1976 at the age of 63, he was able to take early retirement, could he start the personal experiment which was to fill his life until he died 22 years later. To add to his schoolboy French he studied the English language, composed "The Project", a paper on its principles in German and

English, searched for and found partners in dialogue on journeys in Europe and South Asia, and in 1980 issued invitations to a first six-week dialogue session in his house in Altenhof near Eckernförde. In the years which followed he met the same fairly constant group of Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims and occasionally Jews, too, at fourteen of these gatherings in Europe and six countries in Asia. They lived together, meditated and took part in the religious life of the faiths of others; they talked, studied, celebrated, worked and relaxed. In so doing, these partners in dialogue, men and women, exposed themselves to painful as well as encouraging proceedings. The evidence for this lies in the unpublished minutes of the meetings, in the talks which Reinhard gave up and down the country to religious and non-religious groups, in “the spiritual reflections of our meetings”, as he once described his poetic accounts of the dialogue sessions, and also in the pamphlets and reports written in German and English by his partners.

Special features of the “lived interreligious dialogue”

Reinhard von Kirchbach considered his “living interreligious dialogue” to be a complement to the efforts at dialogue which had been undertaken across the globe. It is characterized by the weaving together of the following particular entities:

Understanding of dialogue stretching far beyond a verbal exchange of thinking

Reinhard von Kirchbach strives for a way of life which draws people towards each other. Keeping house together and watching the evening television news together is just as much part of this as reciprocal invitation to religious celebrations or the request to help with field labour.

Careful attention to the principles of dialogue

No mixing of traditions; no renunciation of one’s own faith; no grading of points of view; no smoothing out of differences. On the other hand: remaining united and allowing no drifting apart; enriching one another; achieving gradual self-development.

Unrelenting disclosure of the temptations to which people, Christians and churches at any rate, are exposed in dialogue

Whilst Reinhard von Kirchbach refuses to judge others or even criticize them, he takes himself to task with correspondingly greater severity. His behaviour also encourages others, as far as is possible for them, to act likewise. He expects them to think that like him they are “called forth from the small grave of our life and from the large grave in which our nations with their beliefs and their creeds lie entombed” („Komm, ICH will mit dir reden“ P 79f.).

Independence in direction and in financing

Reinhard accomplishes his project with their consent and without any interference from the church authorities. He finances it largely from his own means. Partners pay nothing or contribute according to their ability. Contributions and donations are committed to the aim but not tied to conditions.

Continuity of most of the partners, men and women, for almost twenty years

The partners thereby bring to the meetings not only their traditions and current points of view but also a large part of their personal life story, with all its changes and reverses.

The spirituality of dialogue

This can be summed up in the following conviction: God directs the dialogue, and we who take part live according to our belief in the unity of people of different faiths. We live in such a way that the emphasis in our life together rests upon the transcendent momentum of faith rather than upon religious or ideological differences of belief or upon temporary theologies, systems, convictions, strategies or previous experience (compare „Spiegelungen des Glaubens“ (“Reflexions of Faith”) Part I. 3. in “Komm, ICH will mit dir reden” P 133).

A broad horizon for dialogue

No single person can survey the whole horizon, since it is composed of the horizons of faith enjoyed by all those taking part. Moreover, it extends far into the future which God has prepared for mankind. Reinhard von Kirchbach expects that in the fullness of time our own religion and those of others will rise again out of their own sources. (compare „Die Christenheit auf der Suche“ C.II.5.2 in „Dialog aus Glauben“ Seite 198). In these considerations he always includes the theme of local as well as world-wide Christian mission. The distant future seems to him so close that he has no impatience to try to hasten anything that he is imminently expecting. Dialogue is not intent on achieving changes which it hopes to see; it is the consequence of changes which have already begun to take place.

An end and a beginning

Since 1995 Reinhard von Kirchbach had felt that for him the journey in dialogue had ended. In the last three years of his life he devoted his energies to the introduction of his interest into his own church, as if he was only now doing so for the first time. In March 1998 he died in Altenhof at the age of almost 85 years. He is buried nearby in the Gettorf cemetery. He was able to hand his last book “Im Strom goettlichen Wirkens” (in the whole edition titled “Zelte bauen in reissenden Wassern”) to those who came to visit him on his death-bed. In it the last piece bears the title: “Only now have you arrived at the beginning.”

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