

Mehdi Razvi

Interviewed by Michael Möbius

This Wonderful Door

[The interview was carried out in February 2006. Large parts of Mehdi Razvi's own biographical memories were deleted from the text, at his request, for the purpose of the publication in the book "Ich glaube den Interreligiösen Dialog – Zugänge zum Leben und Wirken von Reinhard von Kirchbach" and in www.reinhardvonkirchbach.de in order to avoid the impression that he wanted to brag with the story of his life. Now, four years after his death in 2013, we have taken the liberty to reinsert these passages.]

Mehdi, we are sitting together here in Hamburg in your living room and agreed that you tell me who Reinhard von Kirchbach was for you. To me, this is really solemn. I get straight into your relationship, asking you: Reinhard was looking for a Muslim partner for his project of a living interreligious dialogue. How did he get to you, Mehdi?

One day, he came to our Islamic Centre at "Schöne Aussicht". Our man at the reception had hardly announced a very important and interesting Christian person to me when there already was a knock at my door. Then Reinhard von Kirchbach stood before me. In that moment, something spiritual must have happened between us.

One who is unable to clarify his idea to his church

When he had introduced his plan to me with the help of his small red project description, I soon said to him: "What you actually need is a Sufi as a dialogue partner." He asked: "Can you find such a partner for me?" "Yes," I replied, "I will try it" I had someone in mind. Thus I gave the name and address to Reinhard von Kirchbach.

This must have been in early 1980.

But some weeks later, he was standing there again, distressed: The Sufi had had to stop teaching because he had become ill, and none of his stu-

dents had reacted. Time was pressing because the first meeting was imminent. So I said: "I cannot join myself for two months. But if you are satisfied with it, I can take off for individual days every week and come."

At the Centre, we were going through a very difficult time right then. It was the years before, during, and after the revolution in Iran. Mostly I was left tackle all tasks alone. Even when the later Iranian president Khatami was the director of the Centre, he was mainly abroad and I had to direct the Centre, give the sermons, lead the prayers, and cope with my own work. So it was with difficulty that I could take one and a half day off, being able to take part in the Dialogue in Altenhof on Wednesdays and Thursdays and being back in our mosque on Friday.

Would you like to explain more precisely why you went along with this project?

Because I didn't want to disappoint Reinhard. I felt sorry for him. Very, very sorry. I had a feeling that he was not understood and not very appreciated. He was very lonely.

And how did you react to the content of his project? Did you grasp immediately what dimensions it would take?

You do know Reinhard. He was an excellent theologian but not exactly modern, deeply influenced by Augustine and by Johannine Theology, Moreover, a neo-Platonist in a modern shape. his Christology was very personal, vital, and life-shaping. On the other hand, he was a very private person. He carried his idea around with him for a long time, all the while asking himself new questions and reflecting them deeply and for a long time. Everything was never perfect enough, never ready, never complete. He experienced his faith, a concrete reality, in ever new ways. He could express all this only in his poems. I sometimes heard him – but only a few times – in German. His German talks were linguistically magnificent, a real treat to hear them. But I doubt if the others who were theologically not as well-read or educated could comprehend his spiritual depths. It was also very difficult for me to explain to someone else what Reinhard actually wanted.

And you? Could you understand him?

For me, this was not difficult. We could understand each other as if we were mirrors for each other. That was the most wonderful. Our children noticed that: His children, my daughter, also my wife. He was then not married again then. We were like twin brothers and could talk with each other without laboriously understanding each other. We always consulted each other about our shared questions. We even needed each other in order to find ourselves again, exactly the way you use a mirror. Dialogue brought us together, deepened and enriched us in our spirituality.

So I saw: Here is a man who is very lonely, he has a wonderful church but cannot explain his idea to them. I what that Reinhard is understood, perhaps now with the help of this book.

In your opinion, what is it that his Protestant Church did not understand of Reinhard's ideas, and what should it possibly understand with your help?

The Protestant Church is still very busy with itself. Secularisation has progressed further. 20th Century theology discovered so many new questions and such fascinating topics that most Protestant theologians hardly find the time and energy to deal with non-Christian religions the way Reinhard does. Nevertheless it would be a great pity, even tragic, if this wonderful door that Reinhard opened would not be appreciated at least by some competent theologians. This kind of dialogue needs suitable temperaments who would be ready to risk their own certainties.

He simply lived out the Beatitudes

You already came to know many Christian personalities in your life. What is special with Reinhard in your view?

For me, Reinhard was a living saint, a saintly person, a Christian saint, very conscious of his peccability. He was thoroughly Lutheran. He was fully anchored in his Christology. Christ was his centre. The Beatitudes were the guiding principles of his spiritual experiences. He had fully internalised these contents. He simply lived them out, without effort, without strain.

This insight into peccability cannot be shared like that by you as a Muslim, I must assume?

No, of course not. I am aware how much I have every reason to be modest, but not as a peccability as it is seen by the Lutherans. But with him, it was genuine faith, everyday reality. In this, I learned to appreciate him and held him in very high esteem. Until today, he is a wonderful memory for me and it is an honour, so I can describe it, that I was allowed to meet him.

And what about the special traits of his dialogue theology?

I am not sure if Gowind Bharathan or Bhante Kassapa Thera and Deepal Sooriyaarachchi were really able to understand Reinhard. Ananda could understand him because he came from Europe. But the others? They wanted to interpret him through their own concepts of dialogue. I wanted to understand him not through my concepts but through *his* terms and ideas. After all, I did not have the dialogue with Christianity but with Reinhard. I had the dialogue solely in order to understand *him*.

But he had Christianity on his back!

Not on his back. Not in his baggage but: His Christianity, that was him. He embodied it. He had internalised it.

And what was the innermost driving force in his dialogue? What impelled him?

That was his faith, his conviction. It was his ideals, his enthusiasm. Everything else was accidents.

You never told anything from your wonderful childhood

You were already well-established personalities, grown up and matured in quite different worlds, when you came to know each other, more than fifty and sixty years old. Did your past lives have a role in your relationships?

Yes and no. We did not talk about our past at all. It is difficult to make this understood. I did not tell anything about my family of origin and my childhood. Later, when I was in Altenhof once again, Reinhard mentioned that there are memories from childhood that are never forgotten, and he said to me: *"You never told of your wonderful childhood!"*

We had a feeling that these things are inside us and had an effect even when left unspoken. We knew that we came from good families with a long tradition. We did not have to know the past and the background in life in order to understand each other. We were what we were. We noticed that each had a wide horizon and had learned to bear responsibility for a larger circle of people and for society. Therefore, we could understand each other without knowing details.

For others, however, it may be helpful to learn a bit more about Reinhard's live from this memorial volume. And in my opinion, it contributes to a better understanding of his concern and his texts if we hear more precise details about the live of the persons together with whom he experienced the dialogue. Please do tell something of your life and of the traditions to which you are committed.

I was born on 6th June, 1930, in India. I am typical Gemini: Again and again, I have been at home in two different worlds. In India, I was born into a society with a Hindu majority. There I spent my childhood in a very Muslim family, in a family of landed gentry. We were, if you want to put it like that, upscale countrymen. The family was both very religious and very well-read, even the mothers and grandmothers. We had very many books.

I was born and bred in three cultures: in Hindu, Muslim, and British culture. Muslim was the familial core, and Hindu the environment: Our family was responsible for the inhabitants of our region – about 10,000 people. Along with them, we were then still completely self-supporters. Except for salt and luxury items, we produced everything essential ourselves: Our shoes were made by our shoemakers, sheets and cloth by the weavers, and so on. The same applies to the population. They were partly owners, partly tenants and leaseholders – a very mixed economy. How this came about, that is history. In the 18th century, our region was

taken under British administration. Our ancestor then, a sub-governor – the administrator of a district, one may say – had fought against the British and lost, as it used to be the case in those times. We kept what the Mughal emperors then had given us as a "salary": Land. Land was then used to pay for merits when the emperor was unable to pay in money, and in our case, the land was situated in today's Bihar, north of the Ganges river.

This is why I tell that: In my childhood consciousness, Buddha was, as it were, our house prophet. That's why I have a special love for Buddha until today – just like for Muhammad, for Jesus or Moses. As a child, I dreamt that Buddha then, before he was enlightened, in the course of his migrations, had walked through our village in which I was born. "Knowing" that was a wonderful feeling. Can you imagine that? Such things are important for my later relationship with Reinhard. That's why I tell them.

Thanks. It was important for your later relationship with Reinhard because it is visible here how you experienced religions as equal side by side from your childhood and respected them. Reinhard, in contrast, had to learn that only later.

Did you know Hindus?

Yes, I know our dialogue partner Govindh, and in India I came to know Hindus in their own environment.

Good. Then you understand me perhaps when I say: I have been Hinduised in some ways. When Govindh who initially encountered me with several prejudices discovered this, the barriers between us disappeared. Now, my relationship with him became almost as good as with Reinhard.

I am at home in all religions! The Hindus in our rural environment were old conservative, that is, traditional and unspoiled.

Did they venerate primarily one particular deity?

Many venerated Kali and Shiva, others were adherents of Vishnu. Our family was highly esteemed by our population – my parents just as I myself as a child. Well, I was almost treated like a little god. They brought flowers on a plate, ignited incense, and then approached me the way they dealt with a deity.

Did they do that because of your high status or because of your human attitude?

Many aspects met here. Our ancestry goes back to Muhammad. Therefore, they respected us the way they respect Brahmans, like "people from the lineage of the Gods", like you imagined it for Siegfried and the Nibelungs in the past.

When, as a child, I became conscious of what they were doing with me, I ran to my mother and said, "Mama, am I God?" She laughed at me and said: "How? You are my child, aren't you? And the child of your Dad! Both of us are no Gods!" Thereupon I: "Why do they do that with me, then?" "Well," – she was a very good theologian, my first and last teacher in theology – "because they think that you are a wonderful revelation of God." It was all Greek to me. For years, I gnawed on this nut trying to crack it.

Our house was visited by Sadhus, monks, nuns of Hindus and Buddhists. Buddhist pilgrims came from Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and even from Tibet, and they knocked on our door. There came Roman Catholic priests, monks, and nuns, Anglican pastors, and also Muslim Sufis.

So also Muslims! Was the Muslim population very much a minority?

Yes, they were few. We were their upper class but there were also simple Muslims. In the district town where we also had a house, they were more numerous. In the 18th century, in the war against the British, our family fled from the fortress there, through an underground tunnel that can still be seen today, into our village and then to Delhi. There they remained secure until the situation had calmed down and they could return to their estate. In the meantime, the guerilla continued fighting against the British until a ceasefire was agreed upon.

You can imagine: The reality of these years ran in the family, and I absorbed my ancestors' memories as a precious heritage. Thus it came about that I was at home in different religions from the beginning. I was brought up to meet everyone who entered our house with respect and to render homage to him. If they were religious people, the homage was to be according to their religiosity. That has been crucial.

But not exactly by kissing a Buddhist monk's feet?

No, not like that! The attitude was Islamic. But the Buddhist monks perceived that we felt honoured to serve them, to prepare food for them, and, since they were not allowed to take money, to give them fruit and the like as provisions. Thus they could accept the gifts without violating rules. We also had high respect for the Catholic nuns and monks. They were holy beings in our eyes as children, living saints.

And the dark sides, that which happened behind the scenes as negative things, didn't have a role for you?

The fact that not everyone led such a holy life as he should was clear. But the holiness remained untouched by that. We have an image for that: There was much fish in our watery region. A fish swims through different stretches of water – but internally it remains pure. A human being's inner holiness, so we say, is not diminished by the bad influences of the environment. This is my attitude until today. I am not interested at all to unearth negative things in a human being.

I get back to my question to which traditions you are committed. Certainly some more can be said to that from the field of Islam?

You know, I am a born Imam. I come from a family which has brought forth the highest imams in the course of history – was able to bring them forth. We are all potential imams. I am Shi'ah and a descendant of the Twelver Shi'ah Imams. There is blood from ten of these Imams in my veins (but this is not for publicity!).

Lineage alone does not help. Many people think it is a matter of lineage. No, a potential Imam, if he wants to realise his Imamate, must study and

get qualified. But even that is not sufficient: He must be chosen. Thus I am Imam in Germany today. Back then, I was only born into that situation. My father was no Imam but, as mentioned before, an upscale countryman.

Does this lineage run in the male line?

This is an interesting matter. You know that our lineage starts from a prehistoric woman, from Hagar, Abraham's second wife. Prophet Muhammad was a Nabatean, a descendant of Nabat, a son of Ismael. We are the terrible law-abiding Nabateans against whom St. Paul stood up in the Epistle to the Galatians. Do you know that? Well, the term Nabateans is not used there, but it is meant: The Arabs who strictly stick to the laws and who are not ready to deviate from them, exactly because they are "the children of the slave Hagar" (Galatians 4).

The two most important personalities were women. Abraham and Ismael had secondary roles. Even Imam Ali is not as important as his wife Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. In our genealogy, she is the *Sirr-e-abiha*, the bearer of her father's secret.

Now to continue with what is significant for my relationship with Reinhard:

I was home-schooled at first. It was only at the age of nine that I was sent to a school, to a boarding school near Delhi that I attended up to my 17th year. Then present-day Pakistan was separated from India and I was deported to Pakistan together with my mother.

Of course I came home during the holidays – and in that process, I was migrating because my family had houses in three different places: in Bihar, in Delhi, and in Central India. They constantly commuted and I visited them in the respective places. Even when they stayed in Delhi, I was only permitted, according to the school rules, to visit them once a month on a weekend.

It was a completely Islamic boarding school where I always had a parallel religious and worldly education. Back home, I had had lessons in four languages from the beginning: Urdu, Hindi, Persian, and Arabic. After one year, English was added. Thus I grew up with five languages. The school was very modern. The director then had studied national

economy and modern education in Berlin, starting from Montessori. He also brought along a German Muslima as a teacher. I remember that we frequently visited her grave and prayed for her. Our headmaster was very modern, very Islamic, and an Indian nationalist and friend of Gandhi's. He became the first Muslim president of the new Indian Republic [Zakir Hussain? M.M.]. Even his brothers were educators. The eldest became the director of the "Ottoman (today Islamic) University" in Hyderabad, Deccan. The youngest one became Minister for Education of Pakistan.

Such persons are likely to impart a historical and global horizon to you.

Yes. And as for the traditions to which I am committed, among them is, of course, also the British one. I am at home in British culture just as much as in the Indian or the Islamic. When I am in England, then I am instinctively one of them, being considered as such by them. I was born when George V was still the emperor of India. I was his subject. Then, Edward VII was to come. He had not been crowned yet but was already present in our thoughts so that great grief spread when he had to resign. Then came George VI. When India became independent and India and Pakistan were founded, Elizabeth and Margaret were princesses. They were very beautiful princesses and we all were in love with them.

Back then, even I [Michael Möbius] was a subject – no, a prisoner – of king George VI. in South Rhodesia. He undertook a journey to Africa together with his daughter Elizabeth and was to pass, in his special train, by our detention camp where we were confined by him until 1947. We all lined the tracks in order to catch a glance.

I am equally committed to Sufi Tradition

And what about your Sufi Tradition?

I am committed to it just as to my theological and my Humanist tradition. It is called the mystical dimension in Islam. I had the same man for a teacher who had also been the teacher of my mother and her eldest brother. In our family, we are committed to two Sufi orders: firstly the Suhrawardi, a very intellectual order. My first ancestor who came to

India was a Suhrawardi. He became a student of a great saint from Multan. There is a small town called Uch (Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamische Dimensionen* p. 499) slightly south of Multan. There exists a large mausoleum with the tombs of our ancestors in India. [*Multan is today situated in Pakistan but then this was all India.*]

His grandson was a "Shaykh of Islam", that is, the most senior theologian under the contemporary Sultan of India long before the Mughal era. He had not wanted to take on that office under any circumstances and sought asylum in one principality after the other. But the Sultan did not turn aside from him and kept sending messengers after him in order to fetch him. Even when he finally thought himself safe in Medina at the Prophet's grave, the Sultan did not leave him in peace. The family tradition narrates that then the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him in a dream and told him: There is no way out for you, you must go back to India and accept the office. This is your destiny. He replied: I would rather take poison than the office. Muhammad replied: Go to the Chishtis. Sohe went to the Chishti order and also accepted the office.

Mu'innudin Chishti was then the name of the great master of the Sufi order which may be compared to the Franciscans who do not take worldly things so seriously. He became a Chishti with one of his successors. Since then, these both strands permeate our family on my father's side: On the one hand, a very intellectual strand, and on the other hand, the great respect for those who do not attach great value to worldly things.

These traditions are together in your family. And otherwise?

They are normally separate but I have the blessing of both. And my teacher not only took me along to the saints of our two orders but also to other orders. I received blessings from very different orders. This is part of my personal development and had a great role later on. I grew slowly in these things. Initially I was not able to understand many things and often thought: What do these people want of me. Nor did I understand the meaning of some trials. This often dawned on me much later.

Were you given tasks by the masters?

There were also tasks, but essentially it was a matter of trials in life. When you are a member of an order, it is not only the teachers who give you tasks but life itself imposes tests on you. Trials in life are very hard. You must get through that. A teacher accompanies you in that, and if you get to a dangerous point, he rescues his student.

You ask what I am committed to? I am committed to God. I am committed to the love of God, to God's creation, the love to God's creation. This is my commitment. This is – briefly – all that I am committed to.

I ask you so persistently because there are people without deep roots, without any profound commitments. They know much and can contribute their knowledge even in conversations with people of other religions but are like a leaf in the wind. They can even change their religion if they are greatly impressed.

Religions and theologies are like wonderful flowers, like beautiful musical systems, but I would not change. I would not be able to say, the rose is less valuable than the lotus flower – or vice versa. They are completely different. So I discovered, here in Hamburg, Protestant theology and dialectics – and I enjoyed it: Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, and others – and, of course, also those who did not tread this path: Helmut Thielicke and, of course, Paul Tillich. I enjoyed reading all that, just like others may like to hear good classical music.

And where does all that stay within you? With your well-trained intellect, you were able to arrange it. But even emotionally, much will have been enriched for you.

I love Islam, I love the Islamic sources. But I am also familiar with Hindu writings and liturgies, with Christian liturgies, in Christian and Jewish Holy Scripture. Not that I do not have my own love. I quite clearly have my own identity. It does not get lost. And therefore, the dialogue with Reinhard von Kirchbach was no problem for me.

Let us get to the question of your qualifications and the offices that you held.

I am a full theologian, a mujtahid and Imam, which corresponds to a habilitated professor at German universities. In this, I got the final polish here in Hamburg. And I am also a jurist. For twenty years, I worked here in Germany as a Muslim judge, having to pass judgement according to Islamic law in questions of marriage and complicated divorce processes. But my highest title is “Imam“.

And how did you get authorised for all that?

When I came to Hamburg, this felt, to me, like a plunge into an empty swimming pool. But I found help. At the mosque in Schöne Aussicht, scholars from Iran, one after the other, were there as directors. One of them became something like an elder brother to me. He helped me to get the highest qualification from Iran.

Did that take place as private lessons of a student with a teacher?

Initially yes. But later on, one must work for one's knowledge independently. In the end, of course, one must provide evidence that one has mastered one's subject. But you must keep in mind that I already had completed my “apprenticeship“ in Pakistan where I passed my “journeyman's examination“. It was here in Hamburg that I then received my “master craftsman's certificate“.

For how long were you in Pakistan after 1947?

From 1947 to 1954, that is, for seven years.

That means that, in the end, you were still very young, only 24 years old!

Yes, and it was an agitated time, like the adventures of a sailor. Through the Pakistan National Commission, I got a UNESCO scholarship and was employed to study the intellectual, spiritual, and social problems in post-war Europe. I was to investigate what we in Pakistan could learn from the development in the West. In this process, I came to France, Germany, Britain, and Switzerland for two years.

Where in France have you been?

In Paris, Lille, Roubaix, and in Mulhausen in Alsace, in working-class areas and problem cities in order to understand what was the matter there.

Before the beginning of the war of independence, I was the only Pakistani who got a permission, in those days, to travel even to Algeria. France was not ready to issue a visa for me but, as a consequence of pressure by the UNESCO, they gave in. I saw immediately what was brewing there. When I was on my way back, two high-ranking officers of the French army who certainly belonged to the French secret service intercepted me. They claimed that they wanted to get me to safety from this dangerous area and started to question me. I was afraid that they would shoot me and just leave me lying there – and nobody in Pakistan would ever know where I had disappeared to. When they finally asked for my opinion about the French administration in Algeria, I had enough. I said: You do know that I come from Pakistan. Pakistan was part of the British Empire. Today, we are independent – and there is the best friendship between the British and us. If you come to us, you will not perceive any tension. I wish you would find a similar solution in Algeria. Thereupon they took me to the city centre of Algiers and said: Now you find your way alone. You will not have any problems.

In the end, I wrote a final report which was very useful for my principals and also for myself. You probably know that I am privately a pacifist. It was also in this context that I met my German wife who worked in Pakistan in the “International Voluntary Service for Peace“, IVPC. Until today, we have a close relationship with the Quakers.

But you only got married in Hamburg?

No, we got married already in Pakistan, 53 years ago. In my case, many things happened already at a young age.

Youth is the “longest“ part of life anyway.

Yes, but on the other hand, part of my youth was lost due to the war of independence in India. Many things could never happen. The time between my 15th and my 18th year was very turbulent. In those days, our family lost all their worldly possessions.

So, now you understand what I am committed to.

Yes, I thank you very much. And will you please say something about your family today?

Yes, it consists of my wife, our daughter, and our two grandchildren.

Choosing and training students

And what about your position in German Islam today? The Muslim community in Germany is still very mixed. You are probably not in demand as a theologian from all schools of thought and not known to all.

In Germany, I am the top theologian. The reason for that is that I already survived all the contemporary theologian colleagues. But yes, I am also known among Sunnis. Here in Hamburg, for example, I co-founded the Schura, the council of Muslim associations. We have a team of theologians, and you just met part of this team at the Nordelbian Synod. These persons are my men and women students. Even the first full professor for Islamic theology in Münster, Prof. Dr. Muhammad Kalisch, is my student. When you meet my students, they will always say that I am their teacher.

Initially, we were, together with Prof. Abdoldjavad Falaturi, four colleagues at Hamburg University. He had not habilitated yet and we taught at the Oriental Seminary. We organised a lot together. But we never agreed about ways. I said: We must train students who continue our work, being critical of teaching practice, doing research, writing readable inspiring books, asking what the student needs and not just what the curriculum prescribes.

Wasn't that already about founding an institute or an academy?

Today [2006], the academy is based at our Islamic Centre. All institutions need two things: 1. Funds and thus sponsors, and 2. qualified people who can run the institute. One-man businesses and family clubs are excellent. When, however, their founder is no longer there, the institution is like an orphan. Already when I was still young, I made an effort to raise successors. Initially there were disappointments because you attach your hopes to the wrong persons. From this, however, you win experience how to choose and train your students and what is to be in-

vested intellectually and spiritually in order to achieve the right result for life here.

It is, perhaps, known that you have been cultivating the dialogue with us Christians for decades, at the Church Congresses, in Hamburg, and wherever you are invited, and that you trained many students in Islamic Theology and Law, for their work in Germany. But who knew anything about your earlier years? I thank you very much, Mehdi. Now I understand why the two of you, Reinhard and you, appreciated each other so much.

Reinhard was also appreciated and loved very much by his relatives and even admired. And he was a wonderful counsellor. He could put himself into someone's position and help him.

Excuse me, please, but how do you know this?

I read every human being like a book. When I experienced him, I could read in him like in a book the author of which I know – like in a book that God is writing.

I was strictly against it

Have there been specific events and encounters in your relationship with Reinhard von Kirchbach which you would like to tell about?

In Altenhof, there was once a critical situation when Father Albert, the South Indian Catholic priest who worked for the Vatican was visiting in the dialogue. Together with Govindh, he hit upon the idea that we should hold a Eucharist-like ceremony with buttered bread. Ananda was not in favour of that but was ready to join because, although not believing in it, he considered it harmless. Reinhard was very reserved. I was strictly against it because the boundary with the sacred was not clearly recognisable. For me, such a celebration would have been a sacrilege. Each religion has its very innate mysteries. You must not make them a toy. So we then refrained from this ceremony.

Do you remember that you were controversial with Reinhard some time?

If you want it - we disagreed in our assessment of the Catholic scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin. I never understood Reinhard von Kirchbach's weakness for his theories. I said to him: "You are a Lutheran! You are an Augustinian! What does this superficial thinking have to do with Augustine and Lutheran Orthodoxy?" I tried in vain to understand that.

But you do know that Reinhard received tremendous impulses through Teilhard. Reinhard was filled with the recognition that, in the intellectual and spiritual life of humankind, there have been different consecutive levels of consciousness and that now a new change of paradigm with a new leap of consciousness is imminent.

Why? From where? From God? Through an economy of the Holy Spirit? Teilhard represents a kind of Christian Darwinism! That does not fit in with Lutheran theology.

How did Reinhard von Kirchbach react to your incomprehension?

Once he said to me that he regrets my incomprehension. So I explained to him that, when faced with Teilhard, he forgets everything that he had learned in theology – and that was no small thing. Thereupon he said: "Who are you to teach me my theology once more?" Thereupon I replied: "Who or what I am is not under discussion, but what I say is true; and you know it yourself. Teilhard could never have moved on your level. You are a much greater theologian than he. You only never display it."

Could he follow your often very philosophical thoughts – and you his ones?

Yes, that was so beautiful: He could follow my thoughts – and develop his thoughts freely the way he wanted it. Our communication was initially often difficult but very fulfilling. When we understood each other, this, of course, could not mean that we could always appropriate the thoughts of the other respectively. They were wonderful, these short times in which we encountered each other. And each time there remained the great yearning to meet each other again as soon as possible.

When a sting hit, that was to be accepted

How could you have a sufficient exchange with the other participating religions if you could only take part for individual days?

Of course, I also had conversations with the other partners. Sometimes I asked questions that were difficult to answer. But it was not important for me to find out if they had dealt with these questions and what answers they had. I wanted to know how they tackled a topic from the perspective of Buddhist or Hindu theology which Reinhard had started from a perspective of Christian theology. The most fruitful were the days on which all were well prepared. We moved on well together. Sometimes we were together like students fencing with each other. While we didn't have any intention to hurt each other, it was to be accepted when a sting hit – from both sides.

Why did Reinhard search *multilateral* dialogue? Why did he want to get the religions to the table together and not only talk with them one after the other?

He wanted to have the certainty that the religions can coexist without getting mixed, without splitting themselves, being together without getting separated from each other.

He had arrived at the insight that this was necessary and possible and wanted to see if it could be realised.

Yes, and his approach with that was Trinity. In the centre, there was the Trinity, and all religions stood around it in a circle. He hoped that, at some point, Christian Trinity would prevail. He could not accept that this was impossible.

For this thesis of his that the religions can coexist, he needed a laboratory, and we were his laboratory. I helped him with that as far as my time allowed it. I said to him: The religions must grow together and with each other, they must develop together side by side without infringing on their respective inner core.

Did he have in mind any other aim?

Of course, he strongly believed that the Trinitarian glory would ultimately reveal itself. It was very difficult for him to accept that God transcends all dogmas which, ultimately, are only the opinions of theologians and results of their continuous work with them, having, therefore, only a temporary significance. Theology can never fathom a divine revelation. It can understand God's essence, His attributes, and his works only in their own transitoriness.

And for when did he expect what he expected? In history?

He could never quite accept the paradox of transcendence and history. That, at least, is my opinion. He had the Christian symbols in his heart. He had internalised them to such an extent that he could neither think nor comprehend something else. This was simply his inner truth; not a historical one but a meta-historical truth.

But he took steps in *history* himself towards the goal, wondering how things could continue in history.

I could, therefore, never understand his enthusiasm for Teilhard: Reinhard's own faith was neither historically nor scientifically founded. Basically, his faith was trans-temporal, transcendent, and universal. This faith emanated from a theophany which was fully received: a direct, immediate enlightenment of the numinous, a unique experience of the eternal, the sacred beyond space and time.

I marvel at how deeply you understand Reinhard even there where you do not understand him. And you say it in a way that even Christian theologians can follow you. You do know, after all, that there are efforts in our theology already before and then besides and after Teilhard to include the new science initiated by Darwin into theological thought.

I could never understand that such a great theologian as Reinhard got impressed by the wrong paths of the new sciences. In Lutheran Orthodoxy which is based on grace, faith, and scripture, insisting on the peculiarity of the saved soul despite its holiness, there cannot be any under-

standing for such opinions and positions. The history of Lutheran theology since Schleiermacher and Harnack showed, after all, that this contradicts the essence of Lutheranism.

We were fellow travellers but we had our quite different goals

Let us now turn to the dialogue with the concrete dialogue partners:

How was it possible that Reinhard followed his way of dialogue so unswervingly while the dialogue partners necessarily had to tread their own paths with their own goals in dialogue? I remember how Deepal once tried, on the background of his Buddhist world view, to draw a diagram which represented the possible course of his dialogue path.

Yes, it is true, in every religion there are concepts of how to continue. But the concepts of the other religions are not identical with what Christians think about the last days. Christian hopes for the last days are connected with the return of Jesus Christ and God's judgement. You know that not even the Jews can comprehend this thought, let alone Hindus and Buddhists. Thus we were fellow travellers here and now but we had our quite different goals.

When it was said, at the end of the last dialogue meeting in Pisselberg, that the dialogue partners had walked along a large circle in the course of the past years and now the project had reached a certain goal: Was that liberating for some participants? Were they tired of constantly following along on Reinhard's path without coming into their own?

Of course, Reinhard profited the most from our dialogue. He returned to his innate theological home; I think, without Teilhard and without any illusions. But also we others were all changed. We all experienced, in Reinhard, a wonderful friend who was ready to walk with us wherever we were impelled, and also to stay where we were just staying, in order to then continue our journey of exploration together again. In Pisselberg, we knew that we had reached a crossroad. Now each one had to follow his own path, enriched and strengthened by the dialogue. That was Reinhard's greatest merit and his success.

The duality of holiness and peccability

Do insights come to your mind which you have arrived at yourself for your Islamic faith through this dialogue?

Initially, I wanted primarily to help Reinhard to get out of his loneliness and to be fully understood by his dialogue partner. But I also wanted to share my own convictions. That was my intention, and I did that as far as possible.

I learned very, very much from these dialogue discussions. As I mentioned already, I had discovered a living Christian saint, could come to know him personally, considering and experiencing the world of his faith and feelings through his own eyes and – if I may phrase it like that – through his own senses, externally as internally. This is what we call "tasting the spirituality" in Muslim terminology. I was allowed to comprehend the duality of holiness and peccability as it was perceived by Reinhard although it was very alien to me. In his own person, they were a seamless unity. Nevertheless, Reinhard could never overcome his past, just as Saint Augustine before him could not. He had been a Manichee before he became a Christian. Even for Reinhard, good and evil were nearly equivalent factors. It was only through grace that he was saved. Without it, he would be irrecoverably lost.

This grace that chose him, made him an insightful theologian, and endowed him with an excellent intellect, made it possible for him to transcend the limits of theoretical reason, thus including different religious worlds like Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism into his own religious world without changing or mixing them. Thus he tried to venture into the religious world of his dialogue partners with unrestricted love without fearing to leave his own spirituality. I think that he was sure that the Holy Spirit accompanied him wherever he was, emphasising and understanding.

Reinhard was not only an open-minded Christian but also a very confident German. He bore German history within himself with all its ups and downs. He had been a soldier. He told me how he had reached the

point where he said to himself: *"So far, I served my people. From now on, I will serve God."*

It was very consciously that he experienced and carried out this transition at the time when, at first, he was himself a prisoner of war, and then when he was camp pastor for German prisoners of war in England and in Egypt.

Yes, I know his experiences of being called. They accompanied Reinhard throughout his life, always present and thoroughly determining him. These are immediate religious experiences as they exist in all religions. They are so immediate that they are only formulated and reflected theologically in retrospect. Whoever experienced something similar accepts it and is able to understand and communicate it.

Religions will never merge

If you were so happy about the refined formula for the basic principles of your dialogue in Pisselberg: Were all participants able to comprehend it like that – or did you just help Reinhard to formulate it so that it was plausible to him?

You mean the statements: *"Unmixed but not separable; connected with each other; enriching each other; progressively unfolding."* I worked on this question already then. I am not sure if Govindh, Ananda, Deepal, and Sheikh Rashid were fully conscious of what Reinhard wanted. It is quite clear: Deepal is a convinced Buddhist as is obvious from his book that we recently got from him; Govindh is a Hindu; I am nothing but a Muslim; and also Shaykh Rashid understood Reinhard only as far as it was possible for him in the framework of his Islamic theology. We different dialogue partners were always *side by side*, as fruitful as the impulses were that we gave to each other. Nor can this be otherwise. Religions are independent systems. They will never bring about a great synthesis or merge with each other.

Not even in five hundred years or in the last days?

Not even then. Something like that can never happen. I tried to explain my position to Reinhard: All religions, even the three Abrahamic ones,

are fundamentally different despite their commonalities. That is why they direct their followers on different spiritual paths. We all experience the supra-ontological reality – as we Muslims define the Creator and Sustainer of all the worlds - in quite different ways. Thus we find that each religion has a starting point different from that of its sister. Considered in terms of space and time, they bring their own parameters and dimensions. God reveals himself differently in all religions. His essence remains a mystery, his attributes manifest themselves as differently as the rays of light in our physical world, and he continuously carries out new works. Each religion has its own Logos, its own pneuma, its own revelation, its own language, its own canon, and its own changes in time. Even the concepts of the last days differ considerably. Therefore, theology remains the primary science as already the ancient philosophers – not only the Greek ones but also the Muslim ones as well as the Christian-Scholastic ones – stated.

God did not want to allow it

And if the religions live side by side in great truthfulness and with a great interest in each other – and if spiritual people inspire each other with great openness, becoming aware of their own deficits: Then they will continue to unfold themselves but always "only" becoming more their own selves?

Of course, the religions will change! There will be new impulses and new views. Religions must always process new things and must look for answers to questions that are raised. But this always happens from the sources and roots of one's own traditions. The Religions themselves will remain. But they need each other for their healthy development. Like real sisters, they should love and understand each other. They should also try to educate their children in this sense.

The Christian kind of mission in the eighteenth, nineteenth century and still in the twentieth century, that was a misunderstanding. We should be grateful that the world did not become Christian. If it had become Christian, the Antichrist would have become necessary. In order to cite a completely different example: If all people would become reasonable,

then folly would have to reveal itself. Otherwise there would be no history.

The Christian expectation from the early twentieth century that the world would become Christian already in that generation was like an intoxication. This misunderstanding emerged when Christian civilisation had become increasingly predominant.

What would have been the meaning?

I am learning to be grateful that God preserved us from that. But as a child and young man, I perceived it as extraordinarily annoying that the Muslims were so unteachable against the Gospel and so obstinately closed up against mission.

God did not want to allow that all other religions would disappear from the scene.

In the course of a Catholic mass in Sri Lanka, I experienced that I was just as excluded from Eucharist as our Buddhist dialogue partners. I had never felt as close to them as at this moment. And later on, I understood that our separation into many Christian denominations has the value of leaving space between us for people with totally different world views. The Holy Spirit prevented – in order to use the words of Acts 16,6.7 – that we become rulers of the world, and He keeps up separations so that we do not become dictators.

And also Islam is not monolithic at all; and that is also supposed to be like that.