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Trips along the „Chain around the World“

I did not meet Reinhard von Kirchbach very often. Still, his vision of the interreligious dialogue made a strong and lasting impression on me. In the following, I would like to reflect a little bit about how this impression has influenced important decisions and positions.

How did I as a young girl hear about Reinhard von Kirchbach's interreligious dialogue? Michael Möbius and my mother Dagmar Fischer had worked together a lot in our church. But where and when I heard about the interreligious dialogue first, I do not remember. Did I have any idea what the interreligious dialogue might be?

Encounters: „Pali“ or „You have a home in India“

Gut Wulfshagen. Two days, April 30, May 1, 1994. I was fifteen years old. For the weekend I went to the “interreligious dialogue” with my mother. I still lively remember much of this weekend. Paradoxically, however, Reinhard von Kirchbach is almost completely absent from these memories. In contrast to the experience of so many other people, in my case it was more the encounter with his vision, his work and finally with the people he brought together in his dialogue than the encounter with him.

Somehow, I was soon in the midst of it all: Drying the dishes in the kitchen, Ananda told me a little bit about his life, and I learned that he studied Pali when he became a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka. My (inner) reaction was: „If he was able to learn Pali, I should be able to learn Sanskrit.“ Such things tend not to follow reason. For several years, I had practised Yoga enthusiastically, following a book on Yoga for children, and I had learnt all the Sanskrit names of the positions. I was fascinated by the strangeness of the words (and the name of the language, too), but equally by the discovery that there were words which did not sound quite

so unfamiliar: for example, trikon (triangle). Thus I wanted to learn Sanskrit. And forgot this idea again immediately to learn Spanish instead.

Much greatly impressed me. How Sheikh Rashid strode through the manor house, singing. How I walked through the garden very early in the morning, hearing Ananda play Bach on the grand piano. Or how Govindh unwrapped his puja-articles and explained them to my mother and me. Not that I understood; some even disturbed me, because it seemed so mysterious and mystic – simply very strange. Other things were immediately demanding: on a visit to the “Basisgemeinde Wulfshagener Hütten“ I was promoted to the post of interpreter for Sheikh Rashid. While I taxed my knowledge of school English to the limits, I was simultaneously confronted with this approach to Christian life and believes which was completely new, foreign and in some respects difficult to understand.

Back at the manor house in the evening, the joint prayer to which each of the religions contributed something of its own was a crucial experience. Almost everything was new to me, and those things I had heard or read about before had not possessed a lived reality until then. To be able and allowed to participate in the religious forms of Others as for example in the chanting of “OM” which Govindh accompanied on the small house organ, made them accessible in a special way. And I enjoyed trying my skills at pronouncing Govindh’s full name: Go-vin-da Krish-na Bha-ra-tan („Krishna“ is especially difficult for German tongues, the „ri“ being a vowel and „sh“ and „n“ both being so called retroflex consonants for which the tongue has to be arched back). When we left, he told me: „You have a home in India.“

Consequences: *Chain around the world*

I wanted to know more about religions. Was this something one could study at university? The information I found then (and also those I got a few years later from the career advice section of the job agency) was very limited - and, as I now know, not quite correct. „Study of Religions“ with different foci (regional and/or methodological) is a subject offered at quite a few larger German universities.

I read Glasenapp’s book on “World Religions” and everything else about non-Christian religions I got hold of. A small collection of Buddhist texts appealed to me greatly in its

simple poetic diction. But this and other texts, even secondary literature, had a special meaning for me simply because I was now able to connect the texts with people. People, for whom and in whose lives these texts and rites played a role.

I started to question my own spirituality and religious affiliation, considering that there were other religions and other forms of spirituality and religious practice. And I started to understand that these things were not static; that they did not have to be exclusive, and that it was possible to find new religious homes.

During my final school exams, when I seriously considered subjects to choose at university, I rediscovered “Study of Religions” among the subjects offered. The description of the course appealed to me. Looking for a second subject, I wanted something which would complement the study of religions well. I discovered that a subject called “Indology” existed, and that this entailed (at least at those universities where I applied) studying Sanskrit. My old fancy was newly awakened, and I decided to take up Indology and the Study of Religions at Tübingen University.

In the meantime, Reinhard von Kirchbach had passed away. Some of the books from his library later found their way into mine. It feels great to work with books which have come on strange paths and from previous owners who were special. In Kirchbach’s books I find traces of him: the initials “R.v.K.” or a dedication like “To Reinhard who dared to dream”. There are words and passages underlined, and sometimes I come across commentaries he scribbled on the margins. These show how intensely he studied this material – from the Upanishads to the great Indian epics and the fables of the Panchatantra. As an “after-reader” I find this extremely inspiring. His “reading tracks” are particularly conspicuous in the volume “Upanishads. Ancient Indian wisdom from the Brahmanas and Upanishads” (translated and introduced by Alfred Hillebrandt; published by Diederichs). Of course I can only speculate as to why he underlined particular passages, but it appeared as if he was looking for expressions which reflected his religious thoughts, and maybe for expressions for his attempts at wanting to understand – the attempts at the dialogue. For instance, in the introduction the following sentence is underlined: “He who does not find the solution to the riddle of life goes to ask others, and the person he asks takes the seeker of the truth to a more knowledgeable master.”

And in the excerpts from the Brihad-Aranyaka-Upanishad: “The heart is the basis, the ether the support. As ‘persistence’ it should be worshipped. The heart is the basis of all beings, through the heart all beings find their support.”

On different occasions and at different times I met other people from the dialogue, whom I had not met in Wulfshagen: Mrs. and Mr. Razvi and Halima Krausen from Hamburg, Deepal and Sunethra from Colombo. And even Jens, who is now my husband, found a place in this net of people, in this chain around the world.

I was not able to forget that Govindh had told me I had a home in India. Sometimes there are such words one does not forget, and which are almost like an encouragement if not a responsibility. Where he lives, Malayalam is the spoken language, and thus I decided to learn Malayalam. That, too, was less a rational decision than a yielding to an impulse and an opportunity. Speaking a common language also belongs to the dialogue – even though one cannot learn all languages and not only words connect people.

In September 2000 I went to India for the very first time. Although I did not visit Govindh in Cochin until the end of my month-long stay, the whole journey felt like a homecoming. I cannot explain why. Maybe it was only the certainty in Govindh’s promise. Maybe it is a little bit like this: a country in which you know someone has an individual face is not foreign anymore.

In total, I have so far spent almost 18 months in India. I have exchanged Malayalam for Kannada, and the last time I have seriously studied Sanskrit was for my M.A. exams in 2002. During the months where I tried to understand the subtleties of a regional dance-drama, I understood that Christianity demanded a confession from me (which at some point I was no longer able to give), while there in Karnataka I was allowed to simply participate in Hinduism. This does not make me a Hindu, but it allows me in an unexpected way to be religious and at the same time an agnostic – the great Hindi-writer Nirmal Verma described his relationship with Hinduism in much the same way.

Not everywhere and as a rule one is allowed to participate in Hinduism – in Kerala, for example, non-Hindus are not allowed to visit temples, in Tamil Nadu they are not allowed into the sanctum. “Fundamentalist” movements in Hinduism play a considerably role on all levels of Indian politics. Yet I see a marked difference between Christianity and Hinduism in their position towards spirituality and religious affiliation.

I think that it was for the most part the vision of the “Living Dialogue” which showed me that dialogue happens in living together. From that perspective my time in India is an individual “experiment” in dialogue. Participating in the daily “puja” at the theatre school, visiting temples, celebrating festivals. On the other hand, I am often asked questions about Christianity. What is the difference between Christmas and Easter? Did Jesus *really* rise from the dead? The gods know... I have to accept that people are surprised to learn that my “home religion” hardly plays any role in my life anymore, and that I do not attend church regularly. But telling people about my life and my (religious) background is also part of this dialogue!

It was a special experience to study the role of Krishna in a traditional play. Play a god? What is it about, this bringing the gods on stage? When my teacher Guru Sanjeeva Suvarna and his family came to Germany, we played some scenes from this play in front of German audiences (this, too, a form of dialogic encounter?!). A lady among the spectators expressed one of the possible effects of seeing a god on stage: she felt involuntarily drawn to worship Krishna, just like his opponent in the scene.

For several reasons, my personal interest and participation in the interreligious dialogue has not developed into one of my academic interests. In the beginning of my university studies, I attended lectures by Karl-Joself Kuschel, but I remained sceptic of Küng’s “project world ethos”. Sceptic especially of how it’s clear Christian perspective, but also because it seemed to ignore fundamental differences with alacrity (– but dealing with differences seems to be one of the fundamental difficulties in any approach to dialogue). What I miss most in this and similar approaches is living together, sharing everyday realities: cooking, eating and doing the dishes together.

Even though the dialogue brought me to the “Study of Religions”, my studies were rather remote from it. At Tübingen University, a comparative approach has almost completely lost its importance. On the other hand, my work on Basel missionaries in India in the 19th century focuses in particular on their encounters with people from other faiths and the consequences of “Indian” spirituality on the missionaries’ Christian beliefs.

When I think about how much the experience of the dialogue and the encounter with people from other religions has influenced my life and my world view, the question arises how the participation in the dialogue has influenced those members of the dialogue who participated for many years, and finally how it influenced Reinhard von Kirchbach himself.

Something else I have learned on my trips around the “Chain around the World”: It has more links than expected! Everywhere I find people, friends, homes.