

Hans-Christoph Goßmann

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“Believe the others”

Experience with Reinhard von Kirchbach’s approach to interreligious dialogue

On a drive to Hamburg I learned to know Reinhard von Kirchbach deeply. I had picked him up at his home and we drove to the ‘Nordelbisches Zentrum für Weltmission und Kirchlichen Weltdienst’ (NMZ) [Northelbian Mission Center] where I was working as executive secretary for the Christian-Muslim dialogue. I had to design the courses in the field of religious-, missionary- and ecumenical science, which have to be attended during the time of pastoral probation. I had taught regular courses with a focus on the interreligious dialogue, so once I had asked Reinhard von Kirchbach if he liked to hold a guest lecture in my course. He agreed but furthermore he offered to work out regularly the course design together with me. It was important for him to teach future pastors his experience of what he had learned by interreligious dialogue on their way into their own parish. So I used to pick him up regularly and to drive him to the NMZ in Hamburg, where my courses were held, and

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back home. On the one hand such drives were a wonderful opportunity for keeping contact and discussing with him. So I have learned a lot on these trips. On the other hand for Reinhard von Kirchbach a conversation was not a one-way road. It was crucial for him to listen to my experience in the interreligious dialogue and to discuss it with me. I have sensed that dialogue is a deeply human matter.

Once he had asked me for my point of view, why the encounter with people of other beliefs should be important. I answered him that the interreligious dialogue is not an encounter of confessions, but of people, who are grounded in their unique religious traditions and therefore to acknowledge and respect their difference. Reinhard von Kirchbach fell silent, then smiled and added “and to belief”. I hesitated for a moment. To belief the others – this was not an idiom of everyday language. I hesitated and the flow of our conversation was interrupted for a while. It was a healthy interruption because it transferred our conversation to another level – a level concerned directly with people. While I had previously talked about the interreligious dialogue and thus discussed an intellectual level, Reinhard von Kirchbach gave me the decisive impetus to leave the

meta-level and to move to that of faith. The conversation took a different turn, now we no longer reflected the interreligious dialogue, but got involved in exploring faith. We talked about our personal experiences in the interreligious dialogue and how these have changed us and our faith. Thus the conversation about dialogue became an encounter.

“To believe the dialogue partner of another faith” – this phrase describes a personal relationship with him. It corresponds to the words of the Apostolic Creed, which says: “[I believe] a holy, universal Church, the communion of saints”. The believer does not believe in the church as he or she believes in God. Therefore “hat der römische Katechismus von 1564 in seiner Textfassung des Apostolikums das Bekenntnis zur Kirche mit Recht als ein *credo ecclesiam* abgehoben von dem unmittelbar vorangehenden Bekenntnis des Glaubens ,an’ den Heiligen Geist (*credo in Spiritum Sanctum*).“ [the Roman Catechism of 1564, in its text of the Apostolicum, rightly elevated the confession to the Church as a ‘*credo ecclesiam*’ from the immediately preceding confession of

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faith ‘in’ the Holy Spirit (credo in Spiritum Sanctum)]”.¹

„Der Christ glaubt nicht ,an’ die Kirche (im Sinne eines *credere in*), so wie er an Gott in seiner dreifachen Wirklichkeit als Vater, Sohn und Geist glaubt. Aber er bekennt sich zur Kirche trotz ihrer Fehler und Mängel: Er bekennt sich zur Kirche als dem Wirkungsfeld des Geistes Christi.“ [“The Christian does not believe ‘in’ the church (in the sense of *credere in*) as he believes in God in his threefold reality as Father, Son and Spirit. But he confesses the Church despite her faults and shortcomings: he confesses the Church as the field of action of the Spirit of Christ.”]²

This can be transferred to Reinhard von Kirchbach’s view of dialogue partners of another faith: he does not believe in them as in God, but he trusts them despite faults and shortcomings. He accepts the other person as he is – and thus considers the knowledge of the Lutheran doctrine of justification that every man is accepted by God as he is – without any preliminary work. The view of the fellow human being resulting from this theological anthropology requires ac-

¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, Das Glaubensbekenntnis: ausgelegt und verantwortet vor den Fragen der Gegenwart (GTB 165), Gütersloh, ³1979, p. 152.

² Ibid.

ceptance. Those who follow Jesus Christ shall accept their fellow humans as they are, without any prior effort.

Reinhard von Kirchbach lived up to this postulate in relation to his fellow humans of different faiths. This is the meaning of the phrase: “believe the others”. It reveals a deeply dialogical attitude towards one’s fellow human being and creates a relationship. For if we trust in someone, it means: “We connect our fate with his.”³

Just as Reinhard von Kirchbach believed the other and was admitted to him despite mistakes and shortcomings, so he committed himself to the relationship, to the dialogue with him – knowing well that the dialogue itself is afflicted with mistakes and shortcomings, since it is shaped and practiced by incomplete people. So he said in regard to the interreligious dialogue, that he believes it: „Als einer, der den Namen Christi trägt, glaube ich den interreligiösen Dialog ...“ [“As one who bears the name of Christ, I believe the interreligious dialogue...”].⁴

³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴ Thus in a loose sheet attached to a lecture in Oeversee in 1980 or in Süderstapel in 1984; quoted after: Michael Möbius, „Ich glaube den Interreligiösen Dialog“ Zum Vermächtnis von Reinhard von Kirchbach an die Nordelbische Mission [“I believe in inter-religious dialogue” On Reinhard von Kirchbach's legacy to the Northelbian Mission], in:

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Reinhard von Kirchbach has thus given us the deep insight that it is indispensable to really get involved in the encounter with the other, and he deepened my point of view, which I had expressed during the drive I have mentioned: Religions do not meet, but people who are at home in their different ways, in their religious traditions, and that it is therefore very important to perceive and to take each other serious in our otherness.

Hans-Christoph Goßmann et al. (Ed.), *Missionissima. Beiträge zur Zukunft von Mission, Ökumene und Entwicklung* [Missionissima. Contributions to the future of mission, ecumenism and development], Frankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 186-195, here p. 187.