

„I believe the Interreligious Dialogue”

Reinhard von Kirchbach’s legacy for the Protestant Church (Nordelbische Kirche) and its mission

by Michael Möbius
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When the retired reverent Reinhard von Kirchbach died on the 20th March 1998 at the age of almost 85, he left a rich spiritual legacy to the Church of Nordelbien (the name of the Lutheran Church of Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg is: “Nordelbische Kirche”) and its mission. It still remains open, however, whether the legacy is accepted. Out of his more than 30 books, scriptures and lectures ready to be printed, at that time one sole scripture was published. One year later the booklet “Im Strom göttlichen Wirkens” (In the current of Divine Acting) appeared. All the rest – apart from copies which many individuals had received – is inaccessible.¹ My contribution to this book would like to remedy this. And it’s about much more than books.

Ecumenism and mission were always a lifetime’s passion for Reinhard von Kirchbach. Some still remember his bible studies and lectures in connection with Breklum and the women’s work. In the 70s his understanding of mission extended to the Interreligious Dialogue. This involvement was a big step for him and thence-forward the dialogue stamped and filled his life.

Near the end of his life he was able to write thus about the topic mission²:

“The serious and sustained turn towards a global partnership of religions, conceptions of the world and different understanding of life, a turn which has been held out against uncounted resistance, involves everybody in almost unforeseeable changes in all aspects of life.”

“What would have to happen, e.g., if we opened our mission houses at home and overseas as ‘houses of meeting’ and living together with members of different religions and conceptions of the world? What deep change of our own understanding of mission would have to take place if we wished to encounter without any mental reservation men and women of different religions and understanding of life as partners of equal divine right?

The idea alone seems nearly absurd to us and leads us in great uncertainty, fears and almost spontaneous defence. Such a defence, does it come from faith or an ecclesiastical egoism with its demands, fears and conceivable will of self-assertion? Uncounted questions, problems, temptations and risks appear in front of us. In such situation Jesus’ word always comes into my mind: “Don’t be afraid. Just believe.” (Mark 5,36). Through this word I become a child who lives from what he receives: Secret of the Kingdom, secret of the Gospel, secret of the mission and secret of the faith.”

That’s asking a bit much! Who takes it? These are insistent questions. Who wants to confront them?

However, such an imposition has its previous story, the deep-rooted faith from which it grows. Statements of faith which find their way in a new dimension are scattered now and then in the texts left by Reinhard von Kirchbach. As a guest of a clergyman’s gathering he presented the following text³.

“Being someone bearing the name of Christ, I believe the Interreligious dialogue in which – together with men of different religions and conceptions of the world – we are incessantly lead forward by the Deus Evolutor in a monstrous cosmic biography (evolution) in the direction of the 2nd coming of Christ and in which we are created new each day.

I believe that Jesus as Christ Humanisator engages himself in this global process of dialogue and leads it as the word which comes out of the mouth of the Father, redeeming, demanding and sanctifying.

I believe that God’s spirit as Deus Consummator moves this universal event from inside and outside and enlightens it until the presence of God’s Kingdom, from nearby, will have penetrated and changed also the farthest distance.

‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ means in this context: To live this real past, present and future in relation with one’s neighbours - regardless of their religion or their conception of the world, unconditionally without any prejudice, reservation or addition.”

This confession is defined universally, highly theologically, in a compressed way with the names of God which partly originate from modern science and partly from dogmatic tradition. Audaciously the Interreligious dialogue is imputed to God, the Father himself, as the creating process and believed in as content of faith. Jesus Christ himself with his word of redemption carries on this dialogue. And the Holy Spirit knits together in God’s Kingdom the diverging phenomena of the history of nature, mankind and religion.

Who wants and can consent to such confessing in which a change of paradigm has taken place? Who wants to undergo the effort to interpret this manner of speaking in order to then perhaps have a presentiment that there one speaks about faith as God awakens it today in men referring to the Bible and science alike?

Such a faith, however, does definitely have its predecessors and adherents:

Hundreds of prayer texts left by Reinhard von Kirchbach testify how he has assimilated in his praying his daily family and parish life, his theological, scientific and classical reading and his long journeys. As husband and as father of six children, clergyman and dean he spent more than he should studying the Bible and the Fathers of the ancient church, criticism of society, research of evolution and science of religions. And parallel to that a special manner of praying had developed in him which – not less time consuming – included also the most common knowledge and experience in the individual supervision by God. By all this means all this thinking became theology again.

Here is a prayer from his last years, representative of many, but entirely different⁴:

Detach us from restlessness
We live by You,
THE ONE UNIQUE.
We are still entangled
with the days business.
Detach us from restlessness,
from the distractions
and the dullness of our senses.
Awake us.
Turn us to You,
to hear Your voice
and to follow it
with our heart and mind.
Let us ceaselessly
turn round
come back

*and arrive
 at the words
 which originate in You.
 Gather us
 out of the earth's peoples
 through the voices of Your revelation,
 from the wrong paths of our anxieties,
 from the paralysis of our disbelieve,
 from the doubts of You,
 from the weak belief which dares not accept
 what Your hands create.
 Gather us in You
 in order to go where You lead us,
 in order to believe
 and to keep
 what You create in us
 and around us in this world.
 Let us not deny the small ways
 in which You wait for us each day.
 Let us stay together
 and hold on to each other
 among the immeasurable multitude of faces
 with which You bless Your mankind.
 Don't let us tire
 of following the current
 of Your kindness and power.
 And let our requests go
 into the prayer
 and the thanks
 straight into the middle of Your world.
 (22-09-1996)*

Who wouldn't slowly try to join in his prayer and include within where I myself am on my way and to whom I would like to turn! By doing so, beside whom does one stand when praying? Obviously also beside that one whose background is quite a different religion and in which he also may succumb to self-induced anxieties, errors and paralysis?

How did von Kirchbach come to pray and to work this way?

"This fashioning I couldn't do anything about, it came from outside", he said to his son concerning his starting conditions. Now one should tell about his childhood, his stepmother Esther von Kirchbach, his studies and the war. Also one may learn about his first spiritual experiences which opened his inner ear to "Jesus' voice". Now and then they are reflected in his scriptures⁵:

"Because God has called me and I have answered Him, I live by His mercy, His patience in the current of His acting and by the power of His truth. This life has a temporal end but for me no recognizable limit.

As I dashed, without any hold, towards a precipice of annihilation, Jesus' voice reached me while I continually fell and then I also continually rose, carried towards the light of magnificence from where I was called."

One has to tell about his marriage and his family, his parishes at Schinkel, Gettorf and as dean at Schleswig, about the outstanding impulse given by the scriptures of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit and palaeontologist, up to his occupation with the

scriptures of the pioneers of the Interreligious dialogue and with the documents of the belief of the religions. Due to all this there developed his courageous faith in the Trinity's blessing on all life, all religions and each individual in its peculiar way of living.

Who wouldn't concede him his spiritual journey? It would be nice if a little biography could be published. Many who sought his pastoral care benefited from him. Some who, from distance, saw their conception of faith questioned, were suspicious about him.

Reinhard von Kirchbach, however, not only has written and preached on the gained knowledge, but also has lived it, thoroughly evaluated and dealt with it in great detail. **This is the story of the "Living Interreligious Dialogue"**, an eminent courageous attempt for which he canvassed with the scripture "A Project" in 1978, when he was already 65, retired and married for a second time. There a text is found which sounds like an invitation for an expedition "barefoot through hell".⁶

"A Request

*I ask you
to be with me
a place
where the fire
can settle.*

*I ask you
not to withdraw
when the fire
burns us.*

*I ask you
to wait with me
in the fire
one for the other."*

This enormous project – about which one still queries in retrospect, how such a plan could be envisaged at all – has finally lasted 20 years and gathered – in Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Islamic countries – believers of different great religions who had deep roots in their traditions and where inspired by their faith. Fourteen times, year by year, in a kind of temporary community they lived and learned together for about four to eight weeks and followed thoroughly the rules of the dialogue. Often there were heated discussions as the inviting poem "promises". There arose and proved true a belief in such a close, inseparable belonging together, which previously one could not have thought possible and where, however, all differences were clearly seen. Through these meetings all participants have developed further their own faith and changed their attitude. It became possible to believe in the other's faith without having to adhere to it. And when Reinhard von Kirchbach confesses⁷: „*At my place I can be called by these foreign currents of faith. It remains, however, the ONE UNIQUE WHO awakens the faith and turns me to HIM*”, the other participants have had similar experiences but expressed it differently by means of their religious system and phraseology.

The course and the result of the meetings were in detail documented in records and accompanied by Richard von Kirchbach with books full of prayer and with lectures everywhere in the "Nordelbische Kirche". The records are not evaluated and are unpublished.

Who would deny that these active search movements have followed Jesus' command of mission – in addition to all the different ways in which Christians amongst us follow the command?

This personal effort of a span of his life, money and courage, what, however, has it brought to the "Nordelbische Kirche" and worldwide?

Previously one used to ask: Have men converted to Jesus? Has someone been baptized? Still today it must be permissible to ask such questions. But it is more suitable to answer the following questions: What have the Christians brought to this Interreligious Dialogue and have the non-Christians benefited?

My answer: We have followed Jesus Christ into the dialogue and there we have learned from HIM. All participants, female and male, be it Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims Humanists or Christians kept extensively busy the services of Jesus Christ(right to understand: not in a dogmatic sense). They (and always: we) have accepted Jesus Christ's invitation and have been his guests around the globe, day by day (not dogmatically, not to become members of a church, but like vice versa we all have been guests of Buddha, Krishna, prophet Mohammed when experiencing their invitation). They have allowed themselves to be visited by Christ. They have called on the services of His love, His kindness, His retention, His readiness to learn, His invitation to express themselves and His incredible patience. They have experienced His incorruptibility and His judgement – so Christians admitted having done wrong and asked for forgiveness. I have experienced, how Christ, the crucified, then always followed the path of humility and suffered not a little, which was unbearably to me. Many many “stories” can be told about this.

Concerning success, Reinhard von Kirchbach preferred asking another question:⁸ On our spiritual way, have we (the Christians) ourselves turned round – following Jesus' call that God's Kingdom is near? Have we Christians allowed to be sent by Jesus to us ourselves and against us, that is have we first submitted? Just regarding our Christian mission towards others Jesus has his hands full to protect these women and men against our arrogance, our defrauding hypocrisy, our self assurance, our desire to have our own way and our awareness of superiority in view of our outstanding faith system. And then: Have we followed Christ where *He* wanted to live and I prevented Him, where *He* wanted to speak up and I remained silent? There where I firstly have to *become* a disciple, where I succumb, where my presence makes sense only in a cosmic context? There where, together with others, we lose ourselves and where, unexpectedly, with them we are served by Jesus at His Table?

Furthermore: Reinhard von Kirchbach liked to recount what for their part the sisters and brothers in harmony with the mission of their own religions have brought to the dialogue and what he has learned from it.

From a prayer about Christian mission:⁹

*“You don't stop
sending us.
Where You have sent us
it's You
awaiting our return
like a home coming.
The kindness of Your power
fills the background of the world
in which we live.
Hurry is necessary,
however, no worry.
No step
being foreseen
shall be omitted
and no fear
shall paralyse us.
The darkness,
the pains and the death
are places in which You,
disguised,
are not far from us,
not an inch.*

*You turn us around
 towards You
 in order that all cells
 are on their way
 to meet Your presence.
 There is no measure for it.
 Only that the calm piercing of Your light
 illuminates the place
 where we simply are.
 It is not important
 where we are,
 in our house
 at work,
 or displaced somewhere
 in a corner of a world,
 where we are foreigners.
 My nearest neighbour
 and my farthest neighbour
 remains in the circumference
 of his life,
 of his faith
 and in the secrets
 of his heart enveloped
 in the breath of Your spirit.
 And He fulfils in us
 what You
 as salvation
 create for us
 in unexpected horizons.”*

For its mission this missionary has left a prayerful and approved theology to the church. It just needs to be amalgamated and carried forward.

Thus this praying and working theology can begin to serve our church when the church is praying and undertaking its mission:

Reinhard von Kirchbach once said about his “writing down” – as he called it – and his passing on of the down-written: *“I am like someone working at the bottom of the fountain and laying many beautiful things at the fountain’s edge which nobody comes to fetch.”*¹⁰ Nearly all his texts are such displays and unobtrusively invite us to listen, to question, to answer and to think with him. They can do no more.

As these texts have their origin in encounters and conversation with God, they perhaps deploy their inviting power when, together with a few people, one reads them, prays and thinks them over. There just must be men to ask for it and fix a date.¹¹ One year before his death, von Kirchbach himself made a detailed proposal about *“The course of meetings concerning an engagement with listening prayer”*.¹² And in the booklet *“Im Strom göttlichen Wirkens (In the Current of Divine Acting)”* you find *“Ein Weg zu Beten (A path to prayer)”*.¹³

It’s similar with publishing his scriptures. They will be accessible as soon as we know, within our church and mission, how we could benefit from Reinhard von Kirchbach’s legacy (spiritual inheritance). During a “workshop” one may easily find such benefit. There such people work together who may tell about “the fires” they have found inside men and who sit down at the fire which God has spread out in Reinhard von Kirchbach’s heart.¹⁴

*Let me find the hidden fires
which You have spread
into men's hearts,
that I don't rush past them
and remain awake with them
to listen to what they tell"*

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(“Missionissima” a Celebration scripture in honour of Joachim Wietzke, contributions for the Future of mission, ecumenical movement and development, edited by Hans-Christoph Gossmann, Eberhard von der Heyde, Carola Kienel and Brigitte Richter, June 2005, edition Otto Lembeck, Frankfurt / Main.

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Footnotes:

¹ published: “Vom Zusammenleben des Unterschiedenen – Erfahrungen aus interreligiösen Begegnungen“, Breklumer Vorträge Nr.3. And: „Im Strom göttlichen Wirkens – Meditative Gebete“ Friedrich Wittich Verlag, Kiel 1999. A list of all further unpublished scriptures of Reinhard von Kirchbach may be ordered from the author of this article.

² „Die Christenheit auf der Suche nach ihrem Platz im Zusammenleben mit anderen Religionen und Weltanschauungen (Christianity searching for its place in relation to living together with different religions and concepts of the world)“ 1994, page 33 und page 42/43.

³ Scheet as annex of a conference at Oeversee, 1980 or Süderstapel, 1984. The term “Consummator” (accomplishment of the divine work) can be understood within the sentence itself.

⁴ „In the current ...“, p 45.

⁵ „Eine Art Selbstbekenntnis (A kind of confession)“ in „Vom Zusammenleben ... (On living together ...)“, p 32

⁶ „A Project“, 30 pages, 1978

⁷ „Die Christenheit auf der Suche ... (Christianity searching ...)“, p 45

⁸ Extract from a longer text, written in the Kibbuz Lavi, Israel, on the 10th May 1986, in „Steh auf, der Morgen naht (Get up, morning approaches)“, 1986 p 40ff

⁹ „Als Anfang einer kleinen Zusammenstellung (As the beginning of a small composition)“ Easter 1990, from pages IV.3 and IV.4 of IV, „Der Auftrag der Sendung (The task of the mission)“

¹⁰ In a note written during a conversation of Friedrich von Kirchbach with his father

¹¹ The author is prepared to be contacted by interested persons – and ready to work with them. The same is true for the “workshop” mentioned below.

¹² Keynotes on four pages

¹³ „In the current ...“, p 25ff

¹⁴ „In the Current ...“, p 76

(later supplement to note 3: from the „Vulgata“, Joh. 19,28-30: „Postea sciens Jesus quia omnia consummata sunt, ut consummaretur Scriptura, dixit: Sitio. Vas ergo erat positum aceto plenum. Illi autem spongiam plenam aceto, hyssopo circumponentes, obtulerunt ori eius. Cum ergo accepisset Jesus acetum, dixit: *Consummatum est*. Et inclinato capite tradidit spiritum.“

THE END