From knowledge to mutual recognition

Identity Formation in Europe by Mutual Recognition
in Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue, paths to mutual recognition: crises, chances, means, and benefits

Date: Friday 1ˢᵗ of April 2022

Organizer of the webinar: Committee for the Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue of the Conference of INGOs at the Council of Europe.

Content:

Religion is no longer in vogue - often religions are equated with radical religious movements posing a threat to society. An important aspect of this question of identity, a term often used in connection with religions. Behind the question of identity - "What makes someone unique?" is the question of what constitutes identity and its origins.

However, identity is dynamic - it does not seem to be fixed, but subject to constant development. This insight is especially important in interreligious dialogue when it comes to the mutual recognition of the other. Paul Ricoeur speaks of accepting the other in his or her "otherness" and at the same time recognizing oneself as an active and responsible subject. In this webinar, we will discuss with representatives of different religions what role this plays in interreligious and interconvictional dialogue.

Speakers:

Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse, Senior Research Fellow, Academy of World Religion, University of Hamburg. He is an expert in interreligious dialogue on three levels:
    a) "Dialogical Theology" and pluralisation of theologies at Universities,
    b) "Dialogical Practice" by interreligious engagement on societal level,
    c) "Dialogical Religious Education" by including students in the classroom with different religious and convictional/world views and different backgrounds.

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Prof. Ephraim Meir, Professor Emeritus of modern Jewish Philosophy at the Bar-Ilan University in Israel. From 2009 until 2017, he was the Levinas guest Professor for Jewish Dialogue Studies and Interreligious Theology at the Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg. He was a research fellow at the Centre of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. With Wolfram Weisse, he did research at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, South Africa. He is President of the International Rosenzweig Society.

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Moderators: Gabriele Frey (EBU) & Sören Lenz (CEC)
Co-Founders of the Committee for Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue:

Sören Lenz, is the representative of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) which includes among its members 114 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe. After studies   in Theology, Philosophy, Linguistics and German Literature Sören has served as a pastor in the Protestant Church of Alsace and Lorraine since 1999

Gabriela Frey, Buddhist since a young age, has been working in the European Institutions for 30 years. She is President of Sakyadhita France (French branch of the International Association for Buddhist Women), which she founded. She was responsible for the European Buddhist Union (EBU) becoming a member of the Conference of INGOS of the Council of Europe in 2008 and has represented the EBU there ever since.

The Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue Committee
Conference of INGOs at the Council of Europe
https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

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1. Why do we choose to reflect on Identity?

....in a constantly changing and currently also very threatening world (war), everyone longs for security and something to hold onto (a support), and may seek this, for example, in a religion or worldview.

This search can take two forms:

On the one hand, this support can help one not only to see one's own religious and ideological **position** as important, but also to assume that such an aid could also be important for other people with possibly different religious and ideological backgrounds.

In this case, it could be worthwhile to have exchanges with other people, with their manifold (religious) values, insecurities and hopes and possibly discover where common, future-oriented paths open up. At least this opens one's eyes to respect that others, just like oneself, are on the same path, and searching for truth and religious-ideological support.

This **position** leads to the understanding that everything is in constant change or flux, is transient and thus there is no ultimate solution/security in the here and now.

Religious people, usually assume real peace or a higher justice or comparable values, to be a goal of salvation that can be found in this life, after death or in a later life. Nevertheless, or precisely for this reason, one should also make a concrete commitment in the here and now to world peace, social cohesion and justice and discern how such a commitment can be justified by the religious beliefs, world views and political convictions which people hold.

Only when we take into account this diversity of ideas and perceptions is it possible for us to use existing networks to bring as many people as possible alongside us on this journey. The magic word is "inclusion" and not "exclusion". It is about "common ground", about common values, which everyone is prepared to defend.

On the other hand, the desire for security and stability can also lead to a fixed, self-contained identity that excludes others.
A rigid identity can lead to discrimination, violence towards everything that does not correspond to the predefined worldview....

The tendency towards fundamentalism, dogmatism, extremism and radicalisation, in particular, is also rooted in the notion of a fixed identity - a clinging on to a fixed opinion about ourselves and others as good or bad, worthy or unworthy, friend or enemy, this or that.

However, we can choose between the two possibilities here presented.
Should we cling to the false security of our fixed ideas about identity and group-conditioned views, even though it only brings us momentary relief, or can we learn to overcome our fear and live an authentic, peaceful existence in dialogue with others?

It is precisely dialogue with others, a common search that can be beneficial to discovering and consolidating inner balance which can transform anxiety. We can learn to relax and accept that we exist in a situation which is open ended with no fixed parameters. We can be open-minded and yet at the same time committed to the values we all stand for in the Council of Europe. An exciting, enriching lived together.

Gabriela Frey, Strasbourg, 1st April 2022

2. Identity Formation in Europe by Mutual Recognition in Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue

1. Introduction

1.1 „Interreligious dialogue can (also) contribute to a stronger consensus within society regarding the solutions to social problems"[1]. This quote from the 2008 White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living Together as Equals in Dignity" marks the first instance of religion being addressed in the context of intercultural understanding by the Council of Europe. Since then, awareness of the relevance of interreligious and interconvictional dialogue has grown throughout Europe and the world, a development to which the Council of Europe has contributed significantly. Yet the definition of the term "identity" in the 2008 White Paper remains vague[2] and stands in need of further development. I therefore appreciate the opportunity to offer some thoughts on these questions.

1.2 Instead of "identity", I prefer to use the term "identity formation" which better illustrates the nature of individual identity as a process in continuous development. Standing on its own, the term "identity" potentially implies a stable end result as the goal. In the interest of furthering a more responsible and better way of "living together" in Europe, the term "identity formation" may also prove more useful as a way to highlight potential aims and processes that may aid us in reaching this goal.

1.3 A profound understanding of how identity is formed by encounters with others was proposed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur[3]. He argues that the quest for identity cannot be pursued while protectively shutting out others, but only in relation to them. Paul Ricoeur lays out a twin demand: We must both accept the other in his/her otherness and recognise ourselves as active and responsible subjects in order to achieve mutual recognition and reassurance in the development of our respective identities. With Paul Ricoeur's ideas in mind, I will now present some examples of how coexistence improved in the city-state of Hamburg, Germany, and how building up trust and mutual recognition in interreligious dialogue lead to successful identity formation.

2. The relevance of interreligious encounter for coexistence in the city-State of Hamburg

2.1 The city state of Hamburg has 2 million inhabitants from more than 100 cultural and religious backgrounds. A great variety of initiatives have been employed to improving mutual understanding and coexistence over the past 25 years. Here, strong societal actors have worked side by side to foster coexistence between religious, convictional and secular groups. Frequently, this is not an easy distinction to make: the religious, convictional and secular are intertwined. This observation bears out the theoretical understanding put forward by the late sociologist Peter L. Berger who identified much overlapping and internal diversities in the fields of religious pluralisation and secularisation in his "Two Pluralisms"[4]. Thus, we can regard interreligious dialogue as one factor in the broader field of intercultural dialogue with both religious and secular actors.

2.2 Developing the above-mentioned approach following Paul Ricoeur, we can tentatively conclude that identity formation in Europe needs to follow a given path. First, we need to overcome ignorance by coming to know each other better, and from there we must build up trust

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[1] White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue „Living together as Equals in Dignity" Launched by the Council of Europe Ministers of Foreign Affairs at their 118th Ministerial Session, Strasbourg, 7 May 2008, 22.
[2] Here we read: „Our identity, by definition, is not what makes us the same as others but what makes us unique. Identity is a complex and contextually sensitive combination of elements" Opus citatus, 17.
[3] Paul Ricoeur, "Wege der Anerkennung: Erkennen, Wiedererkennen, Anerkanntsein". Frankfurt/Main 2006.
[4] Peter L. Berger (2014). The many Altars of Modernity. Toward a paradigm for religion in a pluralist age, Boston /Berlin

and mutual recognition. To describe this development in the author's original terms - we must proceed from "*ignorance*" to "*connaissance*" and from there to "*reconnaissances*" and then to "*reconnaissance mutuelle*". This is a remarkably good description of the developments that can be observed in Hamburg. I will briefly mention two examples:

2.2.1 Religious Education for all[5]: In Hamburg, all pupils in public schools are free to choose the subject "Religion" regardless of their religious affiliation or world view (the non-religious alternative is variously called "Ethics" or "Philosophy"). Its curriculum is designed with two priorities in mind: Learning the facts about different religions and their ethical implications, and being part of an exchange with the different Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish etc. beliefs and secular world views represented in the classroom. In these circumstances, the aim is not to bring pupils closer to a given religion or world view/conviction, but to give them more knowledge on multiple religions and world views, to allow them to make a contribution from their own position to classroom discussions, to better understand the positions of their classmates with their religious and secular views, and to develop more respect for each other. This approach holds enormous potential for young people in Hamburg to overcome ignorance about other religions and convictions/world views, to deepen their knowledge, and to develop mutual respect. I do not want to exaggerate the effects this school subject has. There are also pupils in Hamburg advocating the exclusion and condemnation of religious and secular "Others." However, empirical research has shown there is a clear tendency for pupils enrolled in "Religious Education for all" classes to overcome prejudice, to reach better mutual understanding, and to find their own position and the formation of their own identity strengthened by interreligious dialogue in the class-room.

2.2.2 Treaties between the Secular Government of Hamburg and Religious Communities, esp. Muslim Communities[6]: For a long time, Muslims in Hamburg were regarded as just temporary "guest workers" who would leave the country again after their work contracts expired. Over time, it became clear that these Muslims, most of them from Turkey, had made the city their home, and they now form a significant community making up about 7% of the Hamburg's population. As in many other European countries, there is marked resentment against Muslims in Germany. Talks between the Hamburg government and Muslim organisations designed as a trust-building measure started about 12 years ago, and resulted in formal treaties analogous to Germany's state-church agreements signed in 2012. In these, the Muslim organisations recognized Germany's democratic society as the guiding framework for their members, embracing, among other tenets, equal rights for men and women. Conversely the government recognized the Muslim population as an integral part of Hamburg's society and guaranteed them the right to exercise their beliefs and rites, including traditional Muslim burials. Obviously, such a treaty does not prevent single individuals and groups on both sides from clinging to their prejudices, but they nonetheless constitute a greatly relevant factor of mutual recognition and thus pave the way for a civil and peaceful coexistence of different religions and convictions in the secular city state of Hamburg.

3. Conclusion and Vision

The above-mentioned examples illustrate instances of successful coexistence at different levels in Hamburg with reference to the relevance of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

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[5] Wolfram Weisse (2014). La religion à l'école dans le Land de Hambourg, in: Jean-Paul Willaime (Ed)(2014) *Le défi de l'enseignement des faits religieux à l'école. Réponses européennes et québécoises*, Paris: Riveneuve, 67-81.

[6] Wolfram Weisse (2016). Religious Pluralization and Secularization in Continental Europe, with Focus on France and Germany, in: *Society*, Vol. 53, Number 1 (January 2016), 32-40. Wolfram Weisse, (ed.) (2016). Religious Diversity and Secularity. The Treaties between the State and Religious Communities in Hamburg, Documentation Series of the Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg. Nb 4, Münster: Waxmann.

Interreligious and interconvictional dialogue can thus contribute to building knowledge and trust in order to more clearly perceive both the common ground and differences with the intention of participating in the development of a society that respects differences – and at the same time fosters common values of mutual understanding. This is not always easy. Conflicts will inevitably arise, especially when religion is politicised (e.g. Muslims in Hamburg espousing Islamist positions advocated by Turkey orIran). But my examples show concrete steps that have been taken to develop values for all citizens in society, values shaping their own understanding and contributing to an identity formation are of great relevance for improving how we live together in Europe.

Vision: Against this background, I propose to develop a vision: Instead of *one* systematically pursuing one European cultural "identity", I would advise the pursuit of cultural "identity formations" in Europe, contextually different, but sharing the same aim to create awareness and encourage mutual recognition as a vital element of a core European value set. This will be shaped at different levels and by different actors, transferred into daily practice, tested, encouraged, and developed by many, including individuals and groups of different religious affiliations and world views, in an interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, shaping and fostering the core value of a European identity formation – *reconnaissance mutuelle*.

Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse

3. Some thoughts about identity from a Buddhist perspective

1. Religious identity in the context of European identity

When we talk about "identity" in the context of the Council of Europe, you might first think of "European identity" and not of "religious identity." The CoE already dealt with "European identity" in 2013/14 and produced a publication with the title "We need to talk about Europe. European Identity Debates at the Council of Europe 2013-14".

Already at that time, the question was to the fore "Should Europe be limited geographically, or can it be based on common values, culture, or religious heritage? How can we ensure respect for diversity and inclusion of people from other cultures, faiths, and traditions?" (CoE 2014, 6)

Today, in this workshop, we are mainly concerned with "faith" and "conviction", and in this context mainly with religious identity. The three pillars of the CoE, human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, guarantee the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In our committee, as far as I remember, "interconvictional" refers to philosophical convictions.

Last week I attended the International Congress of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies. The conference topic was "Sacred Protest: Religion, Power, and Resistance in an Era of Upheaval." Religious, cultural, and national identities are closely inter-woven. Therefore, it is crucial to seek dialogue, bottom-up and top-down, at all levels to avoid violence and discrimination. Thus, I appreciate that Gabriela Frey and Sören Lenz took the initiative to invite us to this dialogue.

In the aforementioned CoE's publication, I found the following sentence: "European Identity in its broadest meaning would correspond to a sense of belonging to Europe, an attachment to a set of values and principles, but also a recognition of the great diversity of cultures, religions, traditions, and languages inherent to the European continent. This diversity might be seen as both an asset and an obstacle to defining a common identity" (CoE 2013–14, 7).

This means the question of religious identity is also linked to the question whether and how a particular religious identity is compatible with a common European identity.

Ten years ago, the CoE was already aware of the ambiguity associated with the concept of different

types of identity. Besides the individual social identity ("I as a human/sentient being"), there are various so-called "collective" identities, such as national, cultural, or ethnic identity. I have noticed several times that social and political scientists often leave out religious identity and gender identity. For example, the CoE publication states: "Politician and political writer Daniel Cohn-Bendit argues that Europeans have two uniting elements: democracy and human rights. These two key factors – not language, religion or culture – form the basis of a universalist European identity." (CoE 2014, 15) But further down, it is said that European Identity is founded on the principles of the universal rights of human beings that need to be practiced in daily life:

"All citizens are to be given the same opportunities; protection is to be extended to religious, linguistic, and cultural minorities; and discrimination is to be fought against as are corruption and organized crime." (CoE 2014, 23).

I think, here, in this committee, we are all on this same page that the religious dimension and the gender dimension need to be considered, especially when it comes to education.

But: different identities can unite and divide. Cultural or national identity as a collective identity should create peace, protect against divergent interests, and bind diversity into unity. Religious identity can unite across cultures and national borders, but it can also create barriers due to cultural or national boundaries or due to certain controversial issues such as women in religious leadership or sexual orientation.

European Identity can be traced back to shared experiences of suffering in Europe and it is closely linked to language and religion. Nevertheless, the common experience of suffering led to European unification and a basis of shared values. After centuries of wars, the idea of a European community became the guiding principle of the 20th century. The Council of Europe created approaches to identity through the European flag, the anthem, and the three pillars. It aims to promote stability and peace by strengthening these three pillars in the member states.

Religious identity is thus guaranteed to all citizens by human rights. Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union declares: "'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.' This individual right also includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief and the freedom – either alone or in a community with others and public or private – to practice religion or belief in worship, teaching, and observance." (CoE 2014, 32– 33)

"According to Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the member states that subscribe to this European Identity are to prohibit discrimination of any kind based on sex, race, color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion. It will not be easy to translate these statutes into action." (ibid. 33).

2. Buddhist understanding of identity

Now, against this background, let us briefly have a look at how Buddhists understand identity - when Buddhists talk about identity, it is primarily about the mode of existence of I and My. From the point of view of the so-called Middle Way school, nothing exists autonomously, completely independent of the other. People often misunderstand it when Buddhists speak about the non-self (Skt. *anātman*). The belief in non-self does not mean that Buddhists deny their existence as sentient beings. They neither deny the person nor the I. It is rather a particular way of existence of identity which they deny. Buddhists believe – and think they can prove it – that identity ultimately, in reality, does not exist as it conventionally appears. It does not exist entirely separate from others but only in connection with others.

Buddhist philosophy speaks of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*). Different from what people often assume,

neither *śūnyatā* nor *nirvāṇa*[7] means nothingness or absolute nothingness.

Emptiness is rather explained as the "stilling of multiplicity" (Skt. *prapañcopaśama*). Only the shaking off the manifold conceptions makes the manifestation of the always existing incomprehensible reality possible. Nirvāṇa is not a beyond, not outside the world. Nirvāṇa and the world are not separated from one another. Nirvāṇa as a spiritual event is the realization, mediated by the negation of all manifold conceptions, of the always-already-givenness of Nirvāṇa, the complete becoming one with that inexpressible reality which one already is in oneself (cf. Schmithausen 1969, 166).

Individuality and non-individuality, I and non-I, Identity and non-identity are concepts. They do not match with reality. Accordingly, the notion of the "I" is one extreme; the idea of "I-lessness" is the other extreme. Identity neither exists nor does it not exist autonomously, independently of the other. The Buddha avoids any negative or positive fixation (cf. Schmithausen 1969, 166).

From this point of view, I agree with my colleague Marcus Bingenheimer when he says that it is rather worrying when, in the last 20–25 years, the term "identity" has gained new importance. "While identity is often used as a justification for legitimate demands, it is also impossible to overlook the latent willingness to use violence that all too often accompanies the assertion of identity." (2002, German Online Ressource)

3. Conclusion

In the field of education, we can learn from Annedore Prengel, who co-coined the term "egalitarian difference" in the context of education. Combining the two terms egalitarianism and difference opens up a new "perspective in which diversity and equality of people are inquired about. Egalitarianism and difference are understood not as opposing but as mutually conditional." (Prengel 2001, 93).

In 2019, together with a group **of** young scholars from different religions we examined our religious, theological, and philosophical traditions in a study related to **"**Gender and Religion**".** We self-critically viewed the relation between egalitarian difference and power. "How can we dissociate gender identity from the current one-sided understanding of its roles?"

Some of you, in this context, will remember our workshop in 2016 "Are religions a place of emancipation for women?"[8]. During this workshop the official representatives of some religious communities claimed that gender identity is irreducibly different and not indefinitely interchangeable, and therefore women, by God's will, should not take on the same roles as men do (Roloff et al. 2019, 39).

The secular state sees it as its task, as a non-religious or religiously neutral authority, to ensure tolerance between religions and world views and to ensure the equal participation of men and women and equal participation of religious majorities and minorities in all areas of society. One can ask whether such neutrality exists or whether this formulation implies a sense of superiority; by this I mean here both the dominance of the secular over the religious and the supremacy of democracy over other forms of government. An exclusivist attitude can lead to dangerous polarization, hardened fronts, and conflicts. But what would be the alternative?

The Buddhist deconstruction of identity may lead to a decentralized, diffuse group identity that has largely saved Buddhism from being instrumentalized for political interests throughout its history. On the other hand, Buddhism emphasizes or constructs an identity that exists only in dependence on

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[7] The spiritual goal of Buddhists, lit. extinction [of greed, hatred, and delusion].

[8] https://www.annenegre.com/egalité-equality-expert/seminar-colloque/women-and-religion/

others, in mutual interconnectedness, which I think comes close and marries well with a European identity.

The question is how European identity formation can engage with other geographical identity formations inside and outside Europe. Religions can have a significant impact because there is already a group identity going beyond national borders between the different world religions. Thus, we could try to use these existing networks. At the same time, we have to use the means of education for future generations. We have to ask ourselves: How can different religious identities resonate with European identity?

Dr. Carola Roloff

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4. Some notes on identity as shaped by recognition of the Other

1. Identity

Identity is not fixed once and for all. It is permanently shaped. It is ambiguous. It may be formed against the negative background of others (*we* against *they*). In the best-case scenario, it is developed in relation with others. Belonging is belonging to a particular group, but also to the world as such. Too much emphasis on particularity leads to parochialism. Too much accent on belonging to all forgets the always concrete embedment in specific groups.

2. Dialogical identity

A dialogical identity is present in different cultures. We find it for example in the African culture, where the term *Ubuntu* („I am, because you are") stands for terms like "Humanity" or "Brotherhood". Similar we find it in the sayings of Thich Nhat Hanh a Vietnamese Thien Buddhist monk when he stresses that being is "inter-being. Buddhism deconstructs identity through an-atma, interconnectedness.

The Arab Andulusian Mystic scholar, Ibn Arabi speaks of the oneness of being.
In Jewish philosophy we find it especially in the thoughts of Martin Buber, author of "I and You" where he states that the "I becomes I through a Thou". Following the Jewish tradition, he claims that in the beginning was relation: *Presence* comes before knowledge and experience, context before content.
For Levinas, the *I* is summoned by the other. Answering the call of the other, the *I* becomes *l'un pour l'autre.*

3. Aim of interreligious and interconvictional dialogue

The aim of interreligious and interconvictional dialogue is the shaping of dialogical persons and societies. Dialogue works with *trans-difference* that brings together diversity (differences) and unity (communication and bridging).

4. Implications

The implications of this perception of identity are threefold:

It means being present for others
It calls for learning from others.
It requires a form of humility: religions are not the Divine itself. Our perceptions of the Divine are only perceptions.
This implies the abandonment of absolute truth claims.

5. Formation of dialogical persons

Although there are limits to dialogue, the interreligious and interconvictional dialogue aims at the formation of dialogical persons, who become ethically involved with each other. The way to create *between* persons (Buber's *Zwischenmensch*) is less founded on knowledge than on trust. Trust is the opposite of fear and is therefore related to truth. In Hebrew the root for Trust is the same as for truth, both are inseparably connected.

Professor Ephraim Meir

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5. Identity and dialogue

Together with my experience as part of a minority community, my thinking on identity was triggered by a traditionalsaying: "The one who knows him/her self knows God."

The first is an enormous challenge because it is not a life between intact worlds where question could be answered bya simple "either – or", but a life between worlds which each in itself is complex and in a continuous process of change.

At first sight, Muslims share certain globally accepted theological principles, but Muslims in Europe originate from different cultural backgrounds and spiritual traditions and their presence here is not

always based on an intentional decision. Familiar institutions, concepts and practices which have been taken for granted are questioned not only by a majority of Others but even within one's own community. Crises of faith and orientation which may otherwise be normal processes of spiritual growth, can assume an apocalyptic intensity. At the same time, the perception of Islam in wider society does not exactly make life easier. Individual Muslims constantly find themselves between their self- understanding and the categories and mental images of others – the oppressed woman, the immigrant worker, the militant fundamentalist etc. – causing at least surprises (in the positive and in the negative sense) when they do not conform to the still widespread stereotypes. These challenges often create a great deal of self-doubt that seems to swamp the space for proactive creativity especially for young people many of whom are from the third generation of Muslim migration and could help develop a locally grounded Muslim culture, that is organically integrated into the whole of Europe.

I am well aware that Muslims are not the only community that is confronted with such challenges. I even perceive a similar search for orientation among mainstream young people concerned about the destruction of our planet through damage to the environment and the nuclear threat. In the latter context, it has long since been understood that, in an age of global economic and technological interconnectedness, the responsibility for the world cannot be shouldered by one nation or community alone.

The aforementioned traditional statement, often ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, provides a theological approach. Translated into a more secular language, one could say, the more you know yourself, the more you may find that inner centre of gravity, that carries you through when the eggshell of hereditary traditions seems to dissolve. Traditionally, this has often been associated with individual introspection which is, indeed, an essential aspect of religious traditions and has a role in countless approaches of withdrawing from the world. But ultimately, humans are part of the world and thus of a network of relationships with not only one's own self but also with fellow humans and other living beings. It is the encounter and interaction with the Other that takes the individual beyond a self-image that is taken for granted, leading to new insights and growth. If in Muslim terminology, life is described as a path, this implies that other living beings
are fellow travellers.

Against this background, interfaith and inter-ideological encounter in Hamburg has a long history. It certainly included exchanges of ideas and sometimes lively debates among students, intellectuals, and leading religious personalities.
Among the latter, I would like to mention two who also had a role as university lecturers in the 1970s. One was Abdol Djavad Falaturi, later to become a professor at Cologne University and a part of an extensive research project on the presentation of Islam in German school textbooks. He was one of the pioneers both for Christian-Muslim dialogue on a theological level and for intra-Muslim dialogue with the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. The other one was Imam Mehdi Razvi who, with his Indo-Pakistani background, contributed theologically reflected practical experiences and philosophical perspectives of interfaith interaction, particularly with Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as with mystical aspects of Islam.

In the more recent past, an interfaith dialogue circle emerged at the Department of Protestant Theology at Hamburg University, first with Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim participants and, eventually including Jewish and Hindu representatives and occasionally some from other religions. Professor Olaf Schumann initiated this dialogue circle and Imam Mehdi Razvi, Geshe Thubten Ngawang from the Buddhist Tibetan Centre became an important partner in this project. The principle was to talk **with** each other rather than about each other and to learn and grow, as inspired by Leonard Swidler. The insights gained in seminars shaped the group and overflowed into the respective communities, leading to mutual visits and cooperation. Within the Muslim community, they triggered theological questions about possible ultimate chances of salvation for non-Muslims,

possibly even beyond the scope of the classical Ahl al-Kitab (People of the Scripture, in particular Jews and Christians). After all, how can you take partners in dialogue really seriously if you expect them to be ultimately lost? A general insight resulting from both intrafaith and interfaith discussions was that beliefs can vary in one's own lifetime, depending on individual learning processes; they can also vary between individuals of one faith group while they can well be congruent with corresponding individuals from other faith groups, the latter especially in cases of close cooperation or commitment to a shared cause. Food for thought in this direction was found in mystical writings, specifically in Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry and the philosophical writings by Ibn Arabi (who is known by some as the "Greatest Teacher" and by others as the "Greatest Heretic"). Their underlying concept of God's unity is not that of a well-defined, exclusive concept of the divine that is to be subscribed to but rather on an idea of Wahdat al-Wujud, the Oneness of Being, which implies an organic unity of the divine qualities manifest in itself in the diversity of creation, including the diversity of religious views.

About the same time but in a different context, a group of carefully selected experts from Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Humanist, and Muslim backgrounds initiated by the provost Reinhard von Kirchbach explored different aspects of coexistence as well as theological and spiritual exchange; the project was included in the work of the university interfaith group in the 1990s. The fruitfulness of the many years of cooperation and exchange became obvious in the wake of 9/11 and was exemplified in activities that ranged from spontaneous interfaith peace prayers to programmes for the prevention of religious extremism – most of them with volunteer work and very scarce resources on the side of the religious minorities.

The international discourse on Muslim positions on the ultimate fate of the religious Other has recently been reflected by Mohammad Hassan Khalil in his collection of essays, "Between Heaven and Hell. Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of the Other".

As for the feedback in the local Muslim community, the theological challenges from outside triggered impulses to "do one's own homework". Much of what seemed strange or alien in the tradition or expression of the Other, be they theological concepts or even ritual expression, may well have existed in one's own tradition at some point. Some of the impulses from outside may well open up new insights into the meaning of one's own sacred scriptures.

Eventually, the idea took shape of learning and researching together from the outset. This was not only about information processing but also about shared experiences together with knowledge about oneself and the other. In my understanding, it promotes identity formation by providing firstly a sense of belonging, secondly the sense of gaining an expanded mode of expression including and beyond the usage of one's own tradition, and thirdly the coming closer to that inner centre of gravity that is so important for trust and self-confidence. It increases an understanding that goes far beyond mere toleration of the Other towards a vision of an organic interrelatedness within our diverse society.

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