# Christian Faith and Religious Diversity – a Protestant Perspective

A Foundational Text from the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany

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# Foreword

"Diversity is better than simplicity[1]" – many people in Germany have been demonstrating against xenophobia under this motto. Diversity means both richness and risk, for the proliferation of differing values, forms of life, and religious views also unleashes fears which we need to take seriously as a reality, whether we share them or not. The only thing that helps against these fears is informing people and engaging them in dialogue, standing up for minorities, and strengthening democratic culture. In a free and democratic legal order, our liberty is also the liberty of our fellow human beings. Therefore, we should welcome and show our appreciation for any religious view that is attune to human rights.

The present foundational text seeks to explain this faith-based Christian position from a Protestant perspective, building on the theological guidelines drafted in 2003 (*Christlicher Glaube und nichtchristliche Religionen* ["Christian faith and non-Christian religions"], *EKD-Texte* 77) and updating them in the direction of a theory of pluralism. It builds upon the insight that there is no such thing as a neutral vantage point from which we can compare all religions. In order to affirm religious diversity, we need precisely to avow our religious convictions passionately and experience the resulting inner freedom, instead of defining our identities by isolating ourselves through boundaries. The certainty we experience through faith in Jesus Christ gives us an awareness that there are no limits to God's capacity to make himself known to human beings. Therefore, more than merely putting up with other religious convictions, we are nudged towards an attitude of tolerance marked by appreciation.

On the strength of this conviction, the Evangelical Church affirms the order of freedom guaranteed by the German Basic Law. The Basic Law assigns the state a neutral role in religious matters. At the same time, it brings religious groups into the public space and invites them to join in assuming responsibility. As a church, we encourage all those who wish to contribute the peace potential of their faith to a democratic civil society. Our protest against the violation of religious freedom in many parts of the world gains in credibility when we as Christians treat other faiths differently.

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1 *Lieber Vielfalt als Einfalt*; the original German term rendered here as "simplicity" also conveys "simplemindedness" and "dullness."

We do not seek to play down the differences between religions. Christian faith respects the foreignness of the other and is at the same time conscious of its own peculiarity. It cannot refrain from confessing Christ, but it would be wrong to assume this implies the denigration of other religions as a matter of principle. Christian faith presupposes an attitude marked by the willingness to listen to and respect one another. This sharpens our sensitivity for a proximity that combines our common bond with an awareness of our differences.

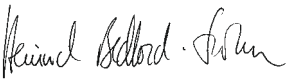
Living side by side with people of other faiths is something we experience on an everyday basis. Besides an attitude of openness, we need rules that guide our interaction as persons of different faiths, e.g., for situations such as when a Christian man marries a Muslim woman or a Christian woman is invited to the religious family celebration of a non-Christian colleague.

"Christian Faith and Religious Diversity" is not beholden to any specific model of the theology of religions. It is precisely in those areas in which religions are very close to one another that the most poignant questions concerning the theology of religions are posed. This is true, e.g., for the three great monotheistic religions regarding their faith in God. This faith is distinctive in each of the three religions. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam differ from one another precisely by what they have in common. Conversely, we should seek commonalities in areas in which we at first glance only see differences and opposites. The section on the relationship to Islam follows through with this in an exemplary way. Judaism, on the other hand, is not just one religion among others for Christians. Without our bond to the Jewish people there would be no Christian faith. The relationship between Christians and Jews is different in this sense from that between Christians and all other religions and requires a portrayal of its own.

The present text was drafted by the Theological Chamber of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) under the chairmanship of Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Christoph Markschies. The Council of the EKD adopted the text with wide approval and is grateful to the Chamber for its work.

"Christian Faith and Religious Diversity" continues the series of foundational texts such as the one drafted on the occasion of the Reformation jubilee (*Justification and Freedom*, 2014) and on the topic of the theology of the cross (*Für uns gestorben* ["Who died for us"], 2015). Just as these, it sees itself as a catalyst for discussion and mutual understanding with regard to the spiritual and theological foundations of the Evangelical church as it approaches the jubilee year 2017. The new discovery or rediscovery of Christian freedom stands at the center of our Reformation heritage. We are called, in ecumenical fellowship and social responsibility, to allow the Gospel's message of freedom to be heard clearly in today's world. Because of this, the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany wishes that this text be distributed widely and read avidly.

Hanover, June 2015



Bishop Dr. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm
*Chair of the Council*
*of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)*

# I Introduction: Coexistence with members of other religions and worldviews as a theological task and a practical challenge

## Diversity as normalcy: challenges and opportunities

Diversity of religions and worldviews has become an intrinsic part of our daily experience. Immigration, the process of "unchurching", and the proliferation of different paths towards individual self-realization have led to a religious pluralism now taken for granted as a factor that normally determines and shapes our lives.

This has brought changes in its wake which Christians view as *both a challenge and an opportunity*. A challenge, because these changes force us to take a stance in our own lives and in our churches in a variety of ways: it can be that partners, friends, colleagues, patients or customers of ours have differing or no religious affiliations – how can we succeed in living together without disavowing the genuineness of our faith or denying its central place in our lives? These changes are also a challenge because it is important we defend the connection between freedom and faith both for ourselves and for all people wherever freedom is under attack on religious grounds. But these new circumstances also represent an opportunity, for it is precisely when living side by side with adherents of other religions that we can face up anew to our own faith and our own traditions. And they are also an opportunity because they prompt us to make ourselves heard in the religious and social public debate and allow us be enriched through the encounter with others.

Because of this, dealing with religious diversity has become a *central task for Protestant theology and for the Protestant churches of our time*: Is genuine, positive religious pluralism possible without relativizing our own faith in the triune God? Or must Christians grudgingly accept religious diversity with the greatest reservations, as a secular rule of thumb to help us get along in the world, but not as a "good ordinance"?

## Theology – law – fields of action

The following text seeks to pave the way a Protestant perspective on the pluralism of religions and worldviews. It builds on the text "Christian Faith and non-Christian religions" (*Christlicher Glaube und nichtchristliche Religionen, EKD-Texte* 77, 2003)

presented by the Theological Chamber and it deepens and updates it. Religious diversity has certainly become more self-evident in the years since that publication – and we face newer, greater, and more urgent tasks in the legal realm as well as in practical fields of action than we did decades ago. The presence of the Evangelical church in a pluralistic civic society requires that not only theology, but also state and church law as well as practical church ordinances find not just pragmatic, but also consistent answers on how to deal with religious pluralism.

The present text seeks to contribute to this process and offer orientation. It assumes a fourfold approach: it ponders theological foundations, it reconstructs the significance of religious freedom for a legal community that has become increasingly pluralistic and international, it presents examples of practical implementation in selected fields of action, and, finally, it takes a stand on specific religious and theological issues.

*Religious diversity* can be accepted in a newer, deeper sense as a *foundation for the encounter of religions* that is particularly germane to the Protestant faith (II.). For the plurality of religions reinforces Evangelical insight into God's manifold ways of approaching human beings. The existence of other forms of religious certainty constitutes the counterpart to the freedom of belief from which Christians live. This conviction will be developed in greater detail below – at the same time, though, we need to confront positions that play down the differences between the religions and seek to reduce them to an ethereal common core. Being open to partnership with other religions is not an avowal of "whateverism"– quite to the contrary. The ultimate goal of approaching religious diversity positively is to strengthen Evangelical identity, which develops in dialogue and not in encapsulation.

The text once again takes a stand on the *legal status of religious freedom* (III.). The rules of state and international law have become closely intertwined in this issue in a variety of ways that pose new questions. As Christians, we approve of other religions being granted the same freedom of belief we enjoy. We wish to contribute our part to an open civil society, not least in our capacity as employers. In the European Union and beyond, we champion *the religion-friendly model of German constitutional law*, which safeguards the public action of religions in a variety of ways; this model stands the test as an order of freedom that enables pluralism, for it draws religions into the public space, inviting and exhorting them to assume mutual responsibility. At the same time, the *protection of religious freedom* must be ensured once again. We resolutely condemn the persecution of Christians in many parts of the world. And we also stand

by those beleaguered in our own country whenever the religious freedom of individuals is threatened or religion is used as an excuse for preventing people from living self-determined lives. Taking a stand for religious freedom today is much more complicated and tension-filled than it was in the insular homogeneity of the institutional church which used to encompass all of society.

The present text presents positions in *selected fields of action* which impact Christians especially and in which the protection of religious diversity must prove itself as providing the foundation for an order of peace (IV.). Instead of issuing anticipatory prohibitions or setting absolute limits, we advocate finding ways of *coordinating, coming to an agreement with, and reassuring one another* – it is procedures like this that allow us to decide responsibly on concrete issues. It is in this spirit that the text takes a stand on issues such as differences of religion in marriage and the family, prerequisites for shared forms of prayer, the mission mandate, and social welfare work under the conditions of pluralism.

The reflections formulated here lead us towards questions posed by a *"theology of religions"* (V.). Because of this, this study concludes by once again working out some fundamental guidelines for establishing long-term compatibility between the positive acceptance of religious pluralism, on the one hand, and distinguishability and disparity, on the other. Our reference points in this quest are: Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith in God, the question whether all religions share a transcendental reality, but also the relationship – unique in a variety of ways – between Judaism and Christianity and their proximity to Islam.

# II Religious diversity and Evangelical identity – theological baselines

## Christian faith and religious pluralism: a basic insight

We experience pluralism in multiple forms today: in the rivalry between different parties to shape the common polity, in the competing products of the marketplace, in the freedom to express one's opinion and choose a lifestyle, in the proliferation of communication communities, but also in the way the life threads of others, though beyond our ultimate comprehension, are inextricable intertwined with our own lives. But pluralism marks our society in religious matters as well. Religious individuals find themselves confronted with the experiences and mindsets of other Christians in their same congregation, as do the churches themselves with respect to other denominations. In addition to this, both individual Christians and the church as a whole conduct their regular, daily lives together with, in the immediate vicinity of, and in competition with the life convictions and ethical orientations of other religions and worldviews.

This situation challenges us. Even though it would be illusory to believe that in the past, the history of Christianity unfolded in an environment of conformity and homogeneity, it is undeniable that we are currently experiencing dizzyingly rapid phases of pluralization that have thrusted us into a new situation. These unfamiliar circumstances fill some with fear, others with hope.

The Evangelical church does not view the pluralism of religions and worldviews merely as an external fact that every modern society should simply take for granted. Instead, it affirms this pluralism as a matter of principle and as a result of its own convictions. Since it understands the world in which we live as a world created by God and saved by God from the misery of separateness from himself, it perceives one's next-door neighbors as well as the religious group across the street not just as strangers or people of another faith who need to be tolerated, but rather as fellow inhabitants of a common space, fellow citizens of a common polity, and fellow addressees of God's word. This insight is not altered by the fact that these fellow citizens do not interpret and experience our common world in the same way as we do, nor share in the assumptions of the Christian faith. Living in close proximity to people who do not see eye-to-eye with us and thus experiencing distance and opposition to one's own faith is not something Protestant Christians today would find uncommon or surprising. Just as they know from their own experience that their personal faith wrestles with doubt

and is kept alive through spiritual crises, and just as they are acquainted with the Christian faith only as one among many confessions – in the same way they affirm the fact that there is a natural place in our society for other religions as well as for religious abstinence or lack of interest. Because they trust that the same God who justifies the godless is building his kingdom in the midst of the ambiguities of their lives, Christians do not demand that the human choir only sing in harmony. Their *witness to a world full of diversity and differences is rooted in the word of reconciliation* that overcomes human boundaries.

For this reason, that fact that Christian believers live next-door to believers of other religions as well as people with no religious affiliation and atheists (of Christian or other background) is more than just an external given. Indeed, because of our Christian faith we see in the diversity of religions and worldviews through which human life manifests itself an expression of a freedom which we would never want to do without. The God who through Christ reconciled himself with the world in spite of its distance from, and enmity towards him is not a God who forces anybody to believe in him. He is the God of all human beings, not just of Christians, but also – to use Paul's words – "of Jews and Gentiles" (cf. Romans 3:29). This holds true even if we no longer divide the religious world into these three groups, as was common in the ancient world. The fact that neither Jews nor Muslims, neither Hindus nor Sikhs share this Christian conviction must not be seen as refuting this insight, for *faith in the one God of all human beings does not preclude the diversity of religious experiences*. Christian faith is not blind to the fact that differing, mutually contradictory convictions on what is ultimately relevant to human beings show the limitations of religious certainty. The existence of other religious certainties besides our own and the freedom of faith out of which Christian life grows –these two form an inseparable whole. Since Christian faith is the individual certainty of a single person, it cannot be advocated responsibly without recognizing and strengthening the right to have diverging religious convictions and therefore the right to religious pluralism. This basic insight calls for distinctions and limitations as well as for a detailed justification:

## Pluralism –"whateverism" – "general religion" – "civil religion"

Protestant Christianity itself finds expression in a multitude of possible life forms and ethical choices and is capable of integrating differing views as long as these can be understood as expressions of a common faith. It contributes this experience to a pluralistic society in which both integration and diversity are indispensable.

However, a pluralism of this kind, which is adhered to for reasons of identity, can easily be mistaken with another position that views all faith stances as interchangeable and therefore as equally valid. It is not a convincing position to take polite notice of the colorful diversity of cultures and religions with a shrug of the shoulders, clinging mindlessly to old habits by reverting, for all practical purposes, to a tourist's point of view. Such a stance of utter indifference and complacency does not realize that pluralism is a task that demands a change in the way we think. Such an attitude does not recognize pluralism as a challenge that enables us to reflect and to be open. It does not see in pluralism an opportunity to understand ourselves in new ways.

Equally inadequate, but in a different way, is the attempt to deal with the multiplicity of religions by reducing them to what they all have in common, to their lowest common denominator as it were. In so doing, everything that is unique to a religion and might evoke objections runs the risk of appearing peripheral. Some currents of the European Enlightenment went down this path by undertaking the quest for a "natural religion". It would consist only of those religious beliefs that were acceptable to all confessions and religions. It would only teach "God in himself" or "absolute God" and orient life towards the worship of God regardless of which concrete god one had in mind when doing so. Similarly, today one often hears the remark that deep down everybody believes in the same god – the pious Muslim calls him "Allah", the law-abiding Jew knows him as "God of Abraham and Moses", and the Christian invokes him as the Father of Jesus Christ. But it distorts our perspective to create a disjunction of this kind between what the religions confess in common and the specific name which each one additionally uses. It is precisely what is peculiar to a religion that can make a total difference and leave a mark on religious beliefs in their entirety. When we accept another human being, we are also accepting precisely what is unique to him and distinguishes him from all other human beings, and not just accepting him because of essential human qualities he shares with other people.

The same applies for religions in their plurality. Religions might display some "family resemblance" on the basis of certain essential features or individual elements, and yet even what they have in common distinguishes them from one another. We do not do justice to any of them by reducing them to a shared essence or a shared view. This even holds true for the concept or notion of God as such. Not even this constitutes a core common to all religions, as the example of Buddhism demonstrates.

A theology of religions will demonstrate its adequacy in the measure that it avoids usurping other religious beliefs or worldviews and co-opting them into its own self-understanding. It is by no means sufficient to recognize as "true" or "good" in other churches, ecclesial communities, or religions whatever we find in them that appears to be fully realized only in our religion. A well-intended inclusion of this type gives the appearance of weakening exclusivism and dogmatism, but it is ultimately not commensurate with Protestant awareness of the uniqueness, irreducibility, and justification of pluralism.

This is one of the reasons why Protestantism refrains from any pretension of being the civil religion of the democratic common polity. To be sure, it is for reasons grounded in their faith that Protestant Christians stand up for this common polity and for the pluralism so unique to it. But the normative foundations of the modern constitutional state, above all human dignity, gender equality, or the right to exercise one's religion freely (both as a positive and a negative right) constitute premises that are binding not because they have their roots in the Christian faith or "have always been Christian." While many foundational principles of our common polity developed, were fought for, and established on the basis of Christian convictions, many others had to be asserted against the opposition and reluctance of the churches. This fact alone should preclude us from circuitously seeking historical continuities that attribute unilaterally and exclusively to Christianity the ethical foundations that hold the different sectors of society together. Accordingly, Protestant churches also expresses their respect for citizens of other beliefs by recognizing that one can arrive at the fundamental values of the German constitution by departing from a number of different worldviews. The church itself derives human dignity from its conviction that human beings are created in the image of God. And it attributes this dignity to God having undeservedly bequeathed human beings with freedom through justification alone. This understanding of human dignity, however, does not mean that the church does not admit that non-Christians have other good reasons for championing human dignity and rights. The opportunity for different religions to feel at home in the framework of the German Basic Law results precisely from the fact that none of them can claim an exclusive connection between their belief system and the foundations of the constitutional state. This does not diminish the legitimacy of seeking productive links between the Christian faith and the modern constitutional state. However, cultivating a patriotic attachment to the constitution or sharing democratic values does not constitute an implicit avowal of Christianity, let alone of Protestantism.

To be sure, Protestant churches in Germany are clearly aware that the constitutional order in itself is not capable of guaranteeing loyalty to the central values of the democratic common polity. This loyalty requires the constant effort on the part of everybody and demands especially of the churches that they do their share of persuading and educating their fellow citizens. But to recognize the modern constitutional state means to believe that it is the overlapping consensuses of different social groups that sustain this state. The churches can assume their specific public responsibility without mistaking it with the notion that they themselves (or they alone) are the touchstone and standard for other confessions and religious communities. Evangelical Christians are therefore glad to hear dedicated voices from other churches and religious traditions advocating freedom and championing the rights of others.

## Open doors – at an actual address: political, social, and religious pluralism

It is befitting that Christian fellowships don't worship behind closed doors. The church does not avoid the public limelight; on the contrary, it welcomes those who happen upon it. Of course, the church can do this only because these open doors belong to a house which can be reliably found under a specific address. The church, after all, is not a mere marketplace in which one can shop around for all kinds of religious offers or where we can count on finding precisely what we like best. The church owes its existence to the Good News which it hears and which gathers it, and this Good News shapes the church's existence on the basis of the faith that has transformed it, overcome it, and sent it off on the path to others.

The church is open to life together with people of other religions and worldviews in precisely the same measure in which it embodies certitude of faith and knows the difference between a house of prayer and a den of thieves, a place of worship and a marketplace. It does not call people to God generally speaking or to a piety of some kind ("It's all right as long as it's religious"), but gathers in faith under the name of Jesus Christ, whom it celebrates and invokes in all its worship services. In doing so, it identifies the foundation to which it owes freedom and reconciliation.

The church's confession of faith is addressed to a world in which there are other confessions and in which there are also people who conduct their lives without articulating their fundamental convictions or ascribing these to God. The church can encounter others openly and sincerely precisely because it has a specific confession under which it can be found and clearly identified in the public sphere.

The criticism is often made that the dominance of a single religion, monotheistic obsession with a single truth, or making one's own religious convictions absolute lead to violence and strife. The church takes this criticism seriously inasmuch as it understands religious pluralism to be the consequence of a legal order based on freedom. But this is also what motivates the church to hold fast to its confession and its commitment to what has become evident to it as being the truth. If the Christian churches themselves would imitate the pluralism of worldviews, accommodate their faith to secularist attitudes, or try to fit in with the indifference of those weary of religion, the result would not be a strengthening of freedom, but rather a loss of profile.

For this reason, Protestantism cannot seek to strengthen pluralism by watering down core convictions of Reformation theology out of fear others might suspect these of promoting intolerance or because these convictions did, in fact, promote intolerance in the past. Protestant churches are very conscious of the dangers of fundamentalism (including Christian fundamentalism) and are not unaware of the disputability of all matters pertaining to faith. But this does not lead them to fall back exclusively on what is indisputable. They find themselves challenged to combine more clearly than in past centuries the frank confession of their faith with the recognition of the right to disagree with it. They do not make the faith of the Reformation invisible if they champion it today in a spirit of enlightened tolerance.

Protestant theology is inconceivable without an affirmation of its manifold use of the word "alone": it criticized traditional forms of church piety with the resolute watchword "by faith alone!"; it rejected the authority of the papal teaching office with its "Scripture alone" and it puts its trust in "the word alone", even though it is quite aware of the human temptation to arrogate power to ourselves. It is only in this light that Evangelical theology can, along with other Christian denominations, utter the Christian confession "Jesus Christ alone". Protestant theology is not surprised that its conviction was contradicted and is still contradicted to this day. When it taught "by faith alone", it had to fight against the impression that it was abandoning the practice of faith to discretionary whim or was neglecting ethics. For this reason, it had to find its own way of praising the good works of human beings. But even today it rejects the notion that

such works earn God's grace. When it teaches "Scripture alone", it recognizes that the relationship between the formation of the canon and the development of church institutions was more complicated than the Reformers claimed. But even today it rejects the notion that church tradition can decide with final authority on the text of the Bible. And, finally, when it confesses with the words of the New Testament: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12), it understands this "Jesus Christ alone" not as a license to coerce others, but as the following confession that is free and therefore allows freedom to others: "For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

While the Reformation watchwords "by faith alone", "through the word alone", "Scripture alone" seek unambiguity and distinctiveness, they should not be confused with an exclusivism that sees oneself in sole possession of the truth. This is proved by the careful study of what each of these watchwords rules out, e.g. when the Augsburg Confession demands of its own bishop's office that it lead the church "through the word alone" and thus precludes the use of human power and force in matters pertaining to religion. The so-called "exclusive particles" aim at safeguarding every person's right to arrive at his or her own insights in religious issues, thus warding off whatever is conducive to overpowering and misleading, cajoling and coercing human beings. Since these particles call for and encourage the self-reliant insight of believers, they do not challenge others' right to see things entirely differently and therefore to believe something different. Yet in the same way that freedom of opinion loses its pungency as soon as people do not have the courage to defend their own opinions, religious pluralism depends upon having the freedom to profess one's religious beliefs. Protestant churches are conscious of agreeing with the Roman-Catholic Church on this issue, the latter having committed itself to freedom of religion in the Second Vatican Council.

It therefore does not contradict the legal and social pluralism of religions if each one of several religions perceives its own understanding of faith as constituting the sole path leading to God. On the contrary, that is exactly what religious pluralism is all about. If we neutralize the conviction of truth and the existential passion of religion by alleging that any profession of faith is per se intolerant, we end up undermining freedom of religion. Such an allegation does not strengthen pluralism, but tries to dissuade the public from embracing religion. Protestant churches thus repudiate this position. But they rejoice over anyone who inquires after truth or is on the quest for certitude, even if that person should later arrive at differing beliefs, and they endure

the irritations inherent in such a situation. Modern Protestantism does not understand the Christian confession as a claim to supremacy among worldviews. On the contrary, it criticizes every absoluteness of religious forms as a distortion and disfigurement of the truth that sets free.

What matters today is that all religions intertwined in the dispute over the true knowledge of God come to realize that they can only exercise their freedom of faith in the measure that other forms of belief and religious practice also remain possible. Wherever human beings face up to the truth, they can count on God's promise that his spirit blows where it chooses. Christians hope this holds true not only for themselves, but for all people over and beyond church walls and religious boundaries. They thus encounter people of another confessional or religious persuasion not just as citizens with equal rights, but also in the hope that God's creative spirit is not far from any of them. Accordingly, Protestant churches acknowledge that persuasive expressions of human self-understanding, authentic forms of spirituality, and responsible configurations of ethical conviction can also be found in other religions. This, however, does not alter the distinctive certainty of the Christian faith that it encounters salvation solely in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

There can be only religious pluralism as long as several religions and alternate belief systems exist side by side. If we would try to integrate the multiplicity of religions by forcing them into a fundamental relationship with an ultimate reality that transcends all religions, we might end up creating a new religion, but in doing so we eliminate pluralism. The claim that deep down everybody believes the same thing plays down differences in a way incapable of appreciating both the opportunities as well as the challenges and conflicts that pluralism brings in its wake, because it dilutes pluralism and fences it in with the illusion of ultimate unity.

## Binding ourselves to the truth and remaining capable of dialogue

There are questions that never lose importance, even if they cannot be answered universally or in a way that is intersubjectively binding. For this reason, we judge hastily if we deem the question of truth to be out of place in the religious arena on grounds that there is no independent criterion for distinguishing any one of several religions as true. It is true, of course, that we have no such criterion. But this does not make the question of truth obsolete.

According to Protestant understanding, religion means binding ourselves to an ultimate certainty which we trust in life and death, which lays claim to our life attitudes and actions, and which, as a result, assumes an ultimate and existential character for us. In and with their religion people respond to what they have experienced as providing their lives with a sustaining bedrock and allowing them to make sense out of reality. "God" is always that on which we set our hearts, upon whom we trust with utmost earnestness, or what we see as laying absolute claim to us. We can call this certitude "religious" even when it is not connected to a specific understanding of God, as in the case of Buddhism. Even someone who distances himself from all religions lives from the convincing answers he finds to fundamental questions of life. The German Basic Law protects such (non-religious) worldviews no less than it defends religions.

Religion does not come into being by a detached observer making a selection from a variety of available choices. The reality of religion is such that it even molds the standpoints from which we make decisions. Where a living religion holds sway, it leaves a mark on our attitudes and core convictions, a mark we cannot brush aside in order to begin contemplating the multiplicity of religions in a "neutral" manner. Just like it is a logical impossibility to learn how to swim without having taken to the water a single time, it is equally impossible to choose a religious tradition in an environment which from the outset is religion-free.

Yet the impossibility of determining religious truth in a neutral procedure does not imply that the question of truth is superfluous or fallacious.

If we dare even to pose the truth question and patiently keep it in mind, it becomes possible to subject our points of view to continual correction and relativize them within a shared space monopolized by no single worldview. A dialogue of religions which renounced the joint quest for truth and thus stopped inquiring after the good reasons which each religion invokes would end up being little more than a polite exchange of views, the cultivation of common interests, and the fostering of mutual understanding. Of course, all of this is important and helpful, but it is not enough to make religions capable of frank dialogue with one another.

The assumption that religions concern themselves in the first place with God, and not just with themselves, is in itself sufficient to refocus our individual religious certainty on what we share and have in common with all human beings. Even though the object of faith is accessible only to the believer through faith, it is also understood as the

ground of faith and is therefore to be distinguished from the act of faith itself and from individual instances of living out one's faith. Because of this, Christian faith in God hopes and trusts that the truth will also prevail over our human efforts to live out our faith. This hope is grounded in the New Testament promise of the Spirit: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Joh 8:32). Faith is not promised that it will be proved right in everything. A faith that mistakes its commitment to the quest for truth with the absolute and conclusive possession of truth is not competent to engage in dialogue with other religions or participate in religious pluralism. It would always be bent on having the final say, would be unable to listen earnestly, would be incapable of joining others in a common quest for the truth, and much less of contributing its expected share to the religious culture of a pluralistic society. Whoever attributes truth solely to his own views frees himself of the burden of the truth question, but also forfeits the opportunity to consider seriously other people's religious beliefs as a possible own response to God's reality. Pluralism demands of us and invites us to put our point of view in perspective, but it also strengthens our capacity to reflect seriously on our identity in the light of our tradition. This process has nothing to do with a relativism that is indifferent towards all questions concerning truth. A culture of pluralism grows with the awareness that there are many different approaches to reality. Accordingly, it grows with the ability to endure variance, otherness and beliefs irreconcilable with one's own.

Biblical texts do not just speak of salvation and deliverance, of freedom and redemption, but also, over and over again, of truth. With this they often mean the unfailing reliability with which the faithful can find refuge and absolute shelter in God. But the Gospel of John in particular also speaks of the truth as a path leading us to freedom. Especially meaningful in this regard are Jesus' words: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). How are we to understand and interpret this today? Can we give it the same significance which the Barmen Synod assigned to it when it made it the basis for its 1934 Theological Declaration? Wherein does its liberating strength lie? What misunderstandings has it led to? But most importantly: What meaning can it have in orienting Christians involved in interfaith dialogue? We cannot resolve this question conclusively here, but we should keep the following in mind:

Protestant theology contests the view (see p. 17) that the words from the Gospel of John quoted above clinch an absolute and unconditional claim to the truth for the theological dogmas of the Christian church or the confessional documents of the Evangelical church. Doctrinal decisions made by the church give witness to the truth, but are not the truth itself. That is why all efforts to force other people into the fellow-

ship of believers for the sake of truth are bound to fail. Religion is a matter of free consent and personal insight. Even in those cases in which faith comes about as a result of an overwhelming experience, this revelation does not impose itself by force, but liberates the individual to respond as he or she chooses. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" is therefore not the expression of a threefold claim to absoluteness or an exaggeration of exclusivity. It speaks instead of a truth that is to be understood as a path to life, indeed, to a life that does not end up clinging to itself, but rather, for the sake of truth, sees fellow human beings as its goal. Jesus' words also mean that the only path we may take is the one that, for the sake of life, aims towards the truth.

These reflections prove just how complex the relationship between the Christian faith and the truth question is and will remain. It is by no means the case that we have to choose between exclusivism (= there is only one true religion to the exclusion of all others), inclusivism (= there is at least one true religion, which includes the partial truths of the other religions) and pluralism (= there are several true religions).

If we contemplate the three central words "way, truth, life" in their reciprocal interconnection we realize that they are not conducive to an understanding of "truth" that is consummate, perceives itself as absolutely right, and can be imposed through force. These words are spoken in response to the uncertainty of the disciples, who are forced to admit that they don't know or understand the way. And indeed: the way to which Jesus is referring in his farewell discourses is – and no reader can fail to see this – the way to the cross, a way upon which witnessing to truth does not procure power over Pilate, but leads instead to Christ's passion and death. Just as the gift of life is to be found in the crucified one and life lies hidden within its opposite, death – in the same way truth can only be sought by relinquishing all power. In any event, the Gospel of John doesn't see any contradiction between the quoted words of revelation (14:6) and the failure to persuade at least the Roman governor to grasp the truth. Pilate gives Jesus the skeptic's cold shoulder: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Even Jesus' words are a witness and do not have the means to coerce or bring about consent unerringly. This sheds light on all other dialogues. In them we will always find tension between the claim to truth also made by religion and the impossibility of being proved right. Because of this, when Christians make a great effort to bear their own conditionality and historical contingencies in mind, they will be able to give witness to the truth all the more credibly when speaking about the truth. The significance of the truth question in religious dialogue forbids any alliance between claims to power and claims to religious exclusivity. It is precisely the absolute commitment to truth that frees us from the illusions of absoluteness that imbue all human claims.

The phenomenon of syncretism, of the "mixing of religions", needs to be judged with this in mind. "Christianity has created language" (Schleiermacher), but it was also capable and willing to appropriate the richness of many languages and cultures. Even Christmas as we celebrate it today blends traditions from the Jewish Festival of Lights, the ancient Roman solar cult, and Germanic midwinter festivals. It became (and becomes) Christian only through the context, which weaves these various elements from different religious cults into a single strain of joy over a God who in Jesus Christ came into the world.

The claim that Christianity was from the very beginning a syncretistic religion (Hermann Gunkel) holds true inasmuch as it did, in fact, appropriate forms originating in different religious environments. It was able to do this because it adopted these traditions in accordance with its own conceptions, thus "baptizing" them in a sense. Christianity's appropriation and acculturation of these elements took and takes place by transforming them on Christianity's own terms, preserving just as much the conciseness of liturgical forms as the freedom to express them in ever new patterns, thus always celebrating God's presence in a true-to-life way. This is different from pursuing syncretism as a policy, which is a distortion of the task of creatively appropriating something foreign in the spirit of the gospel.

# III Religious diversity – the test and proof of religious freedom

## Religious freedom as a universally valid fundamental and human right

The protection of religious freedom is inextricably bound with the fundamental convictions shared by European countries. The German Basic Law (art. 4, par. 1 and 2) commits itself to it, as do the European Convention on Human Rights (art. 9, par. 1 and 2) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (art. 10, par. 1). In terms of the precise definition of the actual protection conferred (*Schutzgehalt*) and in terms of its scope and limits, *religious freedom* is always *conceived in comprehensive terms* and applies equally to all religions. It does not distinguish between religions according to the possible benefit they afford society, the tradition in which they stand, or their potential for obtaining a majority backing, but stands instead in the noble tradition of civil rights and liberties aimed precisely at protecting minorities and dissenting views. Strange and novel forms of religious belief are just as entitled to invoke religious freedom as are traditional confessions backed by the majority of society. The same is true for "negative religious freedom": the freedom to not believe at all or to believe differently. It belongs to the very essence of religious freedom that it not only safeguards diversity, but in many ways also promotes it. Religious freedom is always and necessarily precisely the freedom of those who believe differently.

Supported by the Protestant insight that certitude of belief and the freedom to believe go hand in hand, Protestant churches affirm the legal concept of universal religious freedom. It is imperative that we hold on to this freedom with renewed vigor and with a sharp eye to the diverse problems facing us, especially as society becomes ever more heterogeneous religiously and culturally. In Germany and the rest of Europe, *individual freedom of worship and belief* are protected effectively by the legal order of the state. However, this does not make it any less imperative for us to always come to the defense of those who, in their quest to lead a *life of self-determination*, wish to profess a religion or to renounce from one. The Evangelical church supports the laws of the state wherever these enforce this principle, even when it contradicts religious or family traditions, especially with regard to gender equality. And the church expects the same protection for Christians in those regions of the world where they suffer persecution because of their faith. The fact that the liberal understanding of freedom of religion, conceived as a general and identical right, is not held in esteem everywhere

in the world and that Christians live in fear of losing their homes, their safety, and their lives is a call on us to take a resolute and – by every measure – bold stand for the universal prevalence of religious freedom.

## The diversity of creeds and of forms of religious practice

Faith seeks fellowship. That is why not just the religious freedom of the individual, but also the collective profession of faith and the public *exercise of religion* as well as the self-administration of religious groups are protected by law (art. 4 and art. 140 of the German Basic Law in combination with art. 137 of the Weimar Constitution). This guarantee is geared toward safeguarding diversity, and the following also holds true here: the Evangelical church cannot foster inner strength by restricting the freedoms of others or by defending exclusive rights of its own. It is therefore indispensable that the religious rights of Jews be respected, even in those cases – such as the circumcision of young boys attested to in the Old Testament or ritual slaughter – in which it seeks forms of expression which Christianity did not adopt, but instead expressly rejected. But other religions as well, especially Islam, must be allowed to express their religious convictions on their own terms and in accordance with their own self-understanding. Christian faith and Christian life cannot constitute the "norm" against which they are measured.

Yet at the same time, the collective exercise of religion dare not violate the freedom of the individual. Religious groups are not entitled to wield power over individuals or, in the name of religion, inflict harm on persons entrusted to their care. For this reason, there can be no religious justification for the genital mutilation of young girls or for barring children and women from education or from participation in society. Wherever religion is misused in order to subjugate human beings, minimize their freedom, or raise them to hate, those responsible for public order can and must confront this, both here and anywhere else in the world.

It is good, therefore, when religions champion and advance their *rights by means of dialogue* and face up to controversy and criticism in an open society, as Protestant churches have learned to do in the course of a lengthy historical process. Closing oneself off "from the world" hermetically does not protect religious freedom – it harms it.

## Taking public action in a neutral state

Christians are not content with merely professing their faith; they also wish to act in the public sphere in the light of this faith. Religious groups in Germany have at their disposal a broad spectrum of possibilities for taking public action. Particularly in the areas of education, service, and welfare, Christians and their churches constitute a fundamental cornerstone of the social state, both in state- and in church-owned institutions. Church-run day care centers and schools thus play a central role in providing the *educational services* established by law, thus reducing the burden borne by the state (art. 7, par. 4 and 5 of the German Basic Law); faith occupies a place in German public schools not only in the form of *religious instruction* in accordance with the tenets of the respective religious community (art. 7, par. 2 and 3 of the German Basic Law), but also as a formative element of school life. The same holds true for the Protestant and Catholic charitable institutions *Diakonie* and *Caritas*, which are essential partners of the state in providing social welfare services. The premise and foundation for this broad range of activities lies in the fact that the German constitutional state has expressed the principle of religious freedom with an *openness and commitment that are fundamentally sympathetic towards religion*. It has been thus possible to preserve, transform, or reorganize these areas of church participation in the public sphere in a way beneficial to all sides.

Church action in the public sphere also faces new conditions and challenges in the light of increasing religious pluralism. When considering whether or not and to what extent other religious communities can assume duties in the public sphere, we should remember that the legal system created by German Basic Law – unlike other constitutional states – is rooted in the *principle of ideological and religious neutrality* (art. 140 of the German Basic Law in conjunction with art. 137, par. 1 of the Weimar Constitution: "There shall be no state church"). The Basic Law strives to be "a home to all citizens." The fundamental sympathy towards religion manifested in the provisions of the Basic Law that ensure churches a broad spectrum of public action starts from the premise that these provisions fundamentally hold true equally for all religions.

The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) affirms the religiously neutral state, which has made the equal rights of all citizens the linchpin of its legal order. In light of the fundamental difference between state and church, it is right that the state's *principle of equal treatment* determines the criterion to which the legal order of the state abides in its relationship to different religious communities. Differences of legal status re-

quire a justification. This does not mean that the principle of the equal treatment of religions levels off all differences. The Evangelical church is conscious of the deep bond uniting it with the European heritage and with the legal concept of the liberal constitutional state; because of this, cooperation between the state and Christian churches is characterized by familiarity and mutual trust. It is on the basis of this experience that the church supports that fact that the liberal state extends its *offer of cooperation – a cooperation that is fundamentally sympathetic to religion – to other religions as well*. Therefore, the Evangelical church is particularly grateful that Jewish life in Germany is flourishing once more and can find reliable partners in the state, as demonstrated, for example by conclusion of treaties between religious organizations and the state. Constituting the third major religion, Islam must also be given the opportunity develop freely in Germany, for example through the construction of mosques, but also by participation in public life, particularly in the area of education. All groups involved should see to it that the principle of equal treatment does not founder just because formal criteria originally based on the internal make-up of the major Christian churches are not met, for example in the imparting of religious instruction or in the fact of being organized as a legal entity under public law. What matters – beyond the usual formalities – is that all sides abide by fundamental standards of mutual trust and reliability.

Growing religious pluralism has brought with it an increase in the number of legal disputes. The construction of mosques, the wearing of headscarves by Muslim teachers, the demand that schoolchildren's religious customs be respected in gym class or the exemption from compulsory education ("homeschooling") are examples of this. We should remember that in many cases the position of the church as reflected today in laws and treaties between church and state originally had to be contended for in court. The right, in a *constitutional state*, to *argue and contend in favor one's religion* cannot be called into question; and it is clear that in a pluralized society arguments surrounding the drawing of boundaries between groups are bound to increase, without our needing to perceive this as a major problem. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) does not hesitate to defend its rights whenever it deems this necessary; every other religious community should be entitled to adopt exactly the same attitude. At the same time, it remains the state's responsibility to formulate the "conditions necessary for freedom" and to demand that these be met in the form described above.

## The perspectives of German religious constitutional law in the European and international context

European integration has brought new dynamics into the traditional legal framework covering the relationship between state and church in each country. Extremely different fundamental convictions are coming together in Europe right now, all the way from full-fledged state church systems to Enlightenment traditions, culminating in resolute laicism. But other religions – Judaism in particular, but Islam as well – have been contributing their share to forge a common European identity since the Middle Ages, each in its own way and with regional differences. The legal status of religious communities in the European Union is far from being uniformly regulated. The primary differences are not about the protection of freedom of belief and creed, but relate rather to the activities of religious communities in the public sphere, i.e., they relate to how religions organize their coexistence.

It would be a truncation and misunderstanding of European Union law to reduce it to the assertion of market freedoms. As Europe grows closer together and is entrusted with decision-making power over ever larger areas, awareness of the enormous diversity of its legal cultures and traditions is also increasing. By committing itself to *respect the status of the church and religious communities in member states* (art. 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), the Treaty of Lisbon has explicitly included religious constitutional law within the scope of this growing integration. At the same time, one cannot help but notice that European law is creating *new burdens of justification* that infringe on the scope of religious self-determination, for instance in matters having to do with the special rights of employers, which now must be brought in alignment with fundamental freedoms and the special protection against discrimination afforded to employees in Europe. We willingly face up to this task because we discern in it a *change in the modus, but not in the substance, of church freedom*.

The German Basic Law gives expression to *a common polity that is sympathetically open to religion*. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) resolutely makes the case for preserving this *understanding* and for upholding it as a *model* in the European and international context. When respect for religious freedom is total and the freedom of fellow citizens of other faiths is also guaranteed, the common polity can benefit in a multitude of ways from the religious communities in its midst. Not just the relationship of these religious communities to the internationally-connected state and its institutions, but also the coexistence of different religions and worldviews can be promoted and advanced in this spirit of partnership.

# IV Fields of action at the congregational and church level

## Our goal: rules of procedure for interreligious action

The church does not prepare for encounter with other religions by subjecting itself to cautionary prohibitions or by drawing inviolable borders – it needs, rather, to develop *inner-church procedures for discussing and coordinating* this action among its members and providing them with the necessary *reassurances* so that a responsible balance can be found between individual faith and shared collective concern in each concrete situation. The Evangelical church sets itself the task of accepting other religions as *partners in the open society*, cultivating dialogue with them and trying out different forms of cooperation. It is consistent with evangelical freedom to trust in the creative power and the common sense of congregations and believers who represent and safeguard evangelical faith in dialogue. This holds true just as much at an institutional level for congregations and church organizations as it does for congregation members at a personal level. Of course, the church expects its partners in dialogue to recognize the freedom of the other in the same way and, building upon this foundation, to cooperate in leaving their mark on the public sphere as religious groups.

## Providing support in religious pluralism

The former confirmand who asks her pastor to wed her to a Muslim man, parents who have chosen as godfather a friend who belongs to a non-Christian fellowship, the widow who wishes that her deceased husband who cancelled his church membership years ago be given a Christian burial – requests of this kind are becoming increasingly common in day-to-day parish life. They show that coexistence with people of other religions presents a challenge to congregations and churches particularly at the level of family relationships. Even in those situations in which church law makes very clear provisions, we are still left with the task of explaining the criteria according to which the church responds to these questions and finding pastorally responsible solutions that prove compassionate to those making the requests, yet at the same time preserve the identity of the church.

Living side by side with people who do not adhere to the Christian faith was an issue which already the first congregations of the Early Church already had to wrestle with – especially in those cases in which the marital union of man and wife was to be affirmed and put into practice, even if it meant for a Christian woman to live together with an "unbelieving husband" or a Christian man with an "unbelieving wife" (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:12 – 14). Paul regarded these persons, separated from one another through the confession of Christ and through baptism, to be an intimate communion of husband and wife who put their relationship into practice and belong to one another. A Christian can live in the assurance that his or her unbelieving spouse is "made holy" through him or her. The apostle emphatically discourages spouses from coercing each other in religious matters. Even though faith, according to Paul, is decisive in ultimately determining whether or not we belong to God, he understands marriage as the indissoluble union of two human beings which can even overcome and absorb the failure to agree on faith issues.

This encouragement to remain together does not find its origin in giving the so-called orders of creation priority before the way of salvation opened by Jesus Christ nor does it result solely from the traditional interpretation of the biblical prohibition of divorce. Paul, though lacking in marital experience, is quite realistically aware that a marriage can plunge into a crisis and break down because of the faith of one spouse. He admits that there is no ultimate remedy for preventing this outcome. But he asserts the hope that people will cling to the reality of their life together, even if they cannot see eye-to-eye in religious and faith matters. The spouse who confesses Christ should be able to live without the fear of having to choose between faith and love. Paul ultimately gains this conviction from the core component of his preaching. Reconciliation through Christ is not consistent with turning inward in self-absorbed withdrawal or separating oneself from others. Consistent with this reconciliation is rather the unshakeable hope that God's closeness to the godless is greater than any closeness human beings are capable of achieving among themselves. Because of this, believers can refrain from coercing into conformity nonbelievers or those who believe differently, accepting them instead simply as they are.

As far as marriage is concerned, the Protestant church wants to make sure it does not forsake anybody who belongs to it nor deny him or her God's word and blessing. If the spouse who is not a church member can be won over to this idea, the wedding of a couple can be celebrated in conjunction with a worship service. Things are different if the religious community to which the partner belongs insists on having its specific forms abided by. In this case, one is called not only to display interreligious skill, but

also to encourage couples to engage in conversation with one another and to accompany them in these conversations – conversations that should not sweep religious differences aside or resolve them by intimidation, but rather help future spouses resolve religious issues jointly.

There are Christians who also experience the encounter with other religions as something difficult, indeed as distressing. It is a particularly urgent task that such Christians receive support by providing them with opportunities to discuss these difficulties and offering them support. Christians who in their own family or partnership encounter in a very special way the challenge of living with another religion must be shown ways of affirming their Christian existence and in living it out. The Evangelical church is also aware that its own members who live together with other religions may find themselves questioned in their Christian existence and forced to face difficult decisions. Because of this, it is determined to defend and support its members when others demand that Christians break away from their church. The church expects that the same respect be shown for the Christian faith which it shows for other religions in this area.

This freedom for the sake of others deserves being taken seriously. Nobody today can claim that they choose the people they associate with on the basis of baptismal certificate or religious affiliation. Quite to the contrary, communities of extremely diverse people are emerging in many areas and their heterogeneous composition is beyond anybody's control. In schools and sport clubs, in city neighborhoods and at the workplace, in political parties and in citizens' groups, Christians live side-by-side with people who do not find existential certitude in responsibility before God – or at least not before the same God in which they as Christians believe. Wherever the church assumes responsibility for shaping society, in day care centers and schools, in hospitals and nursing homes, but also in the pastoral accompaniment of soldiers, the church commits itself to helping not just Christians, but anyone thirsting for Christian charity, even those who do not share in the faith which is at the root of this charity.

## Guest and host in interreligious encounter

It often occurs that friendships deepen and social or work-related contacts lead us to situations in which we participate in the activities of other religions. In such cases, our capacity to understand other religions is put to the test. Someone who is invited to a worship service in the synagogue, a circumcision ceremony or a bar mitzvah, or attends an "act of consecration of man" conducted by his anthroposophical neighbors, or participates in the Muslim feast of breaking the fast is a guest among friends.

The guest status defines the expectations that both inviter and invitee place on the degree of integration to be accomplished. The invitee attunes himself to the occasion and the nature of the celebration – just like the host by the same token generously opens his doors and his mind. The guest respects expectations concerning attire and demeanor as well as the choices of food and drink – just like the inviter by the same token proves himself a gracious host by taking the way of life and attitudes of his guests seriously. The freedom of a Christian therefore also manifests itself in the ability, on such occasions, to observe unfamiliar religious regulations concerning outward conduct even when these have no validity for one's own faith. Guests put aside what is their own because they know that the host and the assembled company also perceive them as guests, inviting them to be there with them, but not calling on them to convert. The guest status is also at the basis of the boundaries which prevent us from going along with what would appear to be a break with one's identity. Because Protestantism is convinced that everyone can decide for him- or herself to which degree her or she brings outward forms in conformity with inward convictions, it knows nothing of across-the-board rules prescribing what is appropriate and what not. Christians may accept religiously-motivated headscarves, seating arrangements, or ritual forms out of respect for their hosts. However, their acceptance is based on the fact that they understand these external orders differently (precisely as merely outward guidelines, as cultural conventions), therefore participating in them for reasons other than those of many Jews or Muslims. The freedom to choose how far one will be willing to go is also a manifestation of the specific self-understanding of individual Christian faith. The following Reformation rule holds true: we can orient our actions to the love of neighbor and the benefit of all without having to submit every tiny detail to a ponderous ethical examination, although, of course, nothing is irrelevant when the very confession of Christ is at stake. Assessing whether the former or the latter is the case is not something we can decide abstractly (cf. Romans 14:1 – 15).

## Praying with others

Participating in the prayer of others does not mean invoking strange gods. In many cases it simply means participating of outward forms in much the same way as Christians expect their relatives and acquaintances who are no longer church members to participate in worship services on the occasion of weddings, baptism or funerals: by respectfully accompanying the worship service despite inner reservations. Nobody should have the feeling they are failing to meet expectations just because they are participating in a celebration without sharing in the faith. Neither is it a denial of our own faith when we take part in other people's profession of their own non-Christian faith. No host, however, should be indifferent to the fact that his guests or others joining him in celebration are members of another religion. Anyone intent on not alienating his guests should invest creative energy in making sure that the celebration is a success. This holds true for all celebrations and should be kept in mind as well for interreligious gatherings. This field of action in particular is exemplary of how much can be achieved in terms of mutual understanding if all the people involved clearly know where they stand and where others stand.

In addition, there are specific situations in which we – beyond cultivating hospitality – need to find ways of organizing encounters so that all participants, in spite of not sharing a common faith, can address their God authentically in their own words. Typical examples are school worship services, public worship services of repentance and prayer after collective catastrophes, but also liturgical forms to be used on the occasion of interreligious gatherings. The Bible also provides us with an archetype for this: when the ship in which Jonah flees from God's assignment is hit by a storm at sea, it is said of the sailors of different origins that "each cried to his god" (cf. Jonah 1:5 f.). Already Luther acknowledged in his exegesis of the book of Jonah that the shared expectation that God is kind and has the power to save constitutes a consensus of religions much broader than disagreement over where this God is to be found. In such situations, how do we square what we have in common with the authenticity of each one? Whether we do so by praying *side by side* or *one after the other*, whether we try to find words from our own tradition in which people of other religions might feel at home or from which they might draw solace – this all depends on the liturgical and organizational expertise as well as the wisdom of those bearing pastoral responsibility. The rich language of the Psalms can be particularly helpful in this respect. The uniqueness of one's own identity, the respect we owe to the identity of others, our awareness of the varying degrees of affinity connecting us to other religions – all of

these place high demands on our choice of liturgical forms: these dare not co-opt or neutralize; they especially should not end up being an assemblage of platitudes.

The Evangelical church leaves it to the discretion of every one of its members to decide in accountability to their own conscience which path they will pursue in this issue and how they will act: closely or distantly, involving themselves or remaining aloof, adopting an attitude of joyfully open-mindedness or one of skeptical restraint. What is done jointly must also be accounted for publicly. But everyone should judge for himself in his or her personal environment and refrain from judging over others.

## Public action and mission under the conditions of pluralism

Mission means being sent out into the world. Just like social service, it is an expression of the fact that Christianity can never be content with just keeping to itself, but conforms to God by reaching out to people. All church aid organizations and activities are united in following Jesus of Nazareth's movement for life, which meant being at the service of others.

The success of *mission* does not just depend on the good will of those who feel a special calling to engage in it. Mission is *the responsibility of the entire church*. Assuming public responsibility for missionary activity is among the tasks of ministers, parish councils, and other representatives of church leadership. As a consequence of pluralism, missionary praxis is coming under stronger attack, including the expectation that it dissociate itself unmistakably from any fundamentalist piety. In view of the difficulties which the charismatic movement is posing for the traditional churches, especially for the Roman-Catholic Church in Latin America, the problems surrounding so-called mission to the Jews, and the relationship between overseas mission and colonialism, it comes as no surprise that coexistence with people of other faiths once again forces us to ask about the opportunities and limitations presented by missionary action.

Mission is bearing witness to the freedom for which Christ has set us free (cf. Galatians 5:1). When mission seeks to convince, it should not argue people into believing. When it calls on people to believe, it should not present belief as a human achievement. When it speaks of God, it should not turn him into an idol who wants to get people back on the straight and narrow path through intimidation. When the church

hopes that those who hear its word will repent and convert, it should take it upon itself to renew its own ways of thinking and counter the notion that human beings must and can, through an agonizing effort, "bring themselves" to believe. Mission is based on the trust that faith will come to a person at its proper time and in the measure fitting to that person's hidden life journey. When Jesus promised his disciples he would make them "fishers of men", he drew on their everyday activity to win them over for a new task. He certainly had no intention of charging them with laying traps to ensnare souls.

Witnessing to the freedom inaugurated by Christ, mission lives from the right to make religion public. For Paul, the relationship between Roman law and his own freedom to preach as a missionary was self-evident. The same holds true today. Of course, we must keep in mind that positive religious rights go hand in hand with the right to resist religion. Nobody dare be coerced or duped into believing – both secular law and a Protestant understanding of mission preclude this. Mission has no influence over the fruits that its preaching might yield or over the soil upon which the seeds might fall. Jesus' Parable of the Sower shows the generosity of the sower, who is so rich and so confident of his harvest that he can accept failure. In this spirit, the church can be confident that God's word will accomplish its purpose and not return empty (cf. Isaiah 55:10 f.).

We need to keep this in mind today wherever the Christian faith is proclaimed in the midst of our life together with members of other religions: in Protestant day care centers that celebrate Advent and Christmas, in ecumenical worships services marking the beginning of school, in palliative support provided by Christian hospitals, or in conversations at the workplace about the religious undertones of military conflicts – confessional freedom promotes the freedom of others to decide themselves what they will believe and which religion they will adhere to. It is legitimate to expect from professionals of a Protestant day care center, staff members of a church retreat, a hospital chaplain, or a Christian geriatric nurse that they account for the hope "that is in you" (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). Nobody, however, should have to fear that on such occasions they or their relatives will be robbed of their religion. Whatever it might mean for a Muslim fellow citizen or a Jewish classmate to participate in an event of the local Protestant congregation or to stay in a Christian hospital – it must be clear that the integrity of their own religious life choices will be fully respected. Whoever comes to church seeking help should feel welcome even if they are not looking for what the church itself considers to be essential.

Making trust of this kind possible is a part of what it means to respect members of other religions. Of course, hiding our own religion in order not to offend others is not how we make this respect tangible. Churches are not neutral spaces in themselves. They cannot be expected to be silent about their own faith. However, it can be expected of them that their forms of expression and way of life do not constitute a burden for others in their religious views.

The Christian faith does not anxiously draw boundaries between "mine" and "yours"; neither does it have an interest in exacerbating the differences between people or religions. Instead, it shows its specific character by rejoicing over everything in other religions that is recognizable as an expression of being truly human. Because of this, the church expects its employees not only to show Christian empathy with the cares and hardships of those entrusted to them, but also to renounce any form of pettiness that holds a grudge against others just because they wish to keep their distance from Christianity.

## Charity and social welfare – churches as service providers and employers

More acutely than ever before, the Evangelical church faces the question as to whether and how it will, in a pluralized society, open up its services to members of non-Christian religions – and how it will behave as an employer when its employees break with the Christian message in their confession or their conduct. The Evangelical church is aware that religious diversity may require difficult decisions of it, particularly where it is active in public as an integral part of care-providing structures. The church insists that the Christian mandate to serve other in compassion not be renounced – but it also wishes to open its doors and put love of neighbor into practice by serving, not only its own members, but all of society.

People of other religious backgrounds often make it a point of seeking out Protestant establishments because they appreciate the fact that religion plays a role there at all. This holds true for day care centers, hospitals and nursing services. At the same time, there are members of other religions and worldviews who avoid such establishments precisely because they fear being subjected to manipulation or persuasion. In any event, the church is called to fulfill its service mandate in a way that is sensitive to

other cultures and religions. It is a matter of preserving the "culture of compassion" and adapting it to the needs and expectations of those who are the addressees of charity and social welfare.

Charity and social welfare institutions of the church are beginning to open their doors to non-Protestant and non-Christian employees. In fact, in former East Germany only a small minority of employees (with the exception of those in leadership positions) has church membership. Church institutions have reacted to this situation by offering – or even making obligatory – special courses and programs intended to acquaint employees with the principles underlying the Christian mandate to serve. But such courses can also help employees who are already members of a Christian church be reassured of the connection between their daily work and the Christian calling to serve.

The tension between preserving and promoting Protestant identity, on the one side, and the growing diversity among employees, on the other, cannot be denied. Concepts such as love of neighbor and compassion can only find consistent, non-contradictory expression in the Christian tradition if they also include other (non-Christian) people, and in fact, assume that there is also love of neighbor outside of Christianity: the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 – 37) was neither Jewish nor Christian, but a member of a religious minority; and we know absolutely nothing of the religious affiliation of the innkeeper, whose figure has inspired Christian social service as a model since its very beginnings, for he takes it upon himself, in exchange for payment, to care for someone who has fallen upon robbers.

A compassion based on Jesus Christ's love of neighbor cannot help but be open for other understandings of compassion; the universal claim of neighborly love is not made obsolete by Christian discipleship. Anybody in principle can become the neighbor of someone else whose heart is touched and is willing to help, support and listen – that is how compassion describes interaction between human beings. The Gospel of Luke, in any case, is convinced that compassion does not stop at the walls and membership boundaries of churches – indeed, it dare not stop there. The borders drawn by culture, ethnicity, and religion do not play any role here, but are transcended and called into question by this core story of the Christian faith.

# V Questions pertaining to the theology of religions

## Do all religions refer to the same transcendent reality?

The idea that all religions deal with the same divine reality, but that each religion sketches a foreshortened, one-sided and thus subjective image of this reality would appear to argue in favor of equality. But it also tacitly assumes that one can know God independently of any religion, claiming thereafter that this reality is what everybody calls "God" – although everybody misses it and distorts it in their own way. The apparent attractiveness of this proposed compromise is bought at the price of a well-concealed claim to superiority over the historical religions. In this respect, however, the following holds true: "No one has ever seen God" (cf. John 1:18) – therefore, no one has the overarching view of an independent referee capable of mediating between all religions and giving each one its partial due.

In our view, the significance of interreligious dialogue lies precisely in the fact that it cannot be arbitrated from the perspective of a single correct understanding of God. The recognition granted by law to all religions and which the religions concede to one another stands at the basis of the constitutional state's pluralistic culture of religions, but it does not equalize the respective self-understanding of each religion. Legal recognition cannot perforce put the different paths to salvation on equal footing nor can it demand from them the minimalism of the lowest common denominator.

But would it not be possible for every religion simply to admit that it possesses only a partial knowledge of God and therefore understands just as much (and, for that matter, just as little) about God as every other religion? And should not every person choose from the broad spectrum of religious offerings precisely what appears to him or her to be the closest approximation to God?

The first question is legitimate inasmuch as it is, in fact, indispensable for one to examine one's own standpoint critically in a pluralistic society. We need to become aware of the particularity of our point of view and reflect on it when forming our own identity. But that is not the same as refusing to have an own standpoint or claiming to replace it with a "view from nowhere". One can drive this problem home by recalling a metaphor often used to illustrate religions' communication difficulties: the fable of the elephant and the blind men who touch it from different positions, each one grabbing a different part of its body so that they soon begin arguing as a result of their differing opinions: one of them is only familiar with the elephant's trunk, another one only knows its ear, a third one just knows the tail. This fable is an expression of the wish that all religions

find peace with one another by acknowledging that their discordant views are ultimately non-contradictory since they are based on a single reality. Yet the metaphor only works because it operates on two levels simultaneously: the standpoints of the individuals, which are relative, and the standpoints of the narrator (and those whom he is trying to convince). Viewed from this latter perspective, there was never any doubt as to what an elephant is, how the parts relate to the whole, and that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts. Since such a neutral vantage point above the fray is not available to us when carrying out dialogue between religions, the much-quoted fable of the elephant ends up being suggestive tale of little use.

As far as the second question is concerned, it is a feature of the pluralistic religious culture in which we live that people piece together their own convictions, tending towards a patchwork religiosity. Yet an individual religion of this kind lives on the concrete, public manifestations of religious communities which do not advocate all sorts of things at the same time, but truly believe and champion very specific beliefs. Without clear-cut, well-defined forms such as those represented by Protestant Christendom (but by other confessions and religions as well), hand-made religious biographies will have a tendency to dissipate into uncertainty. The duty – imposed by the legal order and embraced by the church – to accept and to strengthen religious pluralism is not served by suggestions of abstract unity.

## A classic question: do Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same God?

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have in common a professed belief in an only God. Deeply intertwined with their shared monotheism is the understanding that this profession of faith is the response to a revelation that dissociates itself radically and critically from all human notions and images of God. Accordingly, there exists only *one* God who is the creator of *all* human beings and who bestows the *same* dignity upon each of them. It his binding will they do good, and his tangible presence saves and liberates them to a life in peace. That these three families of religions with their different currents belong together shows itself in their faith in the one and only God. And this common bond in turn places them in close proximity to the philosophical monotheism that already developed in Ancient Greece.

All three religions also trace their identity, each in its own different way and with differing consequences, back to Abraham. For Judaism, this means that Abraham is the

ancestor of the Jewish people, a people singled out by God through the covenant of circumcision and bound to the covenant of Torah through Moses. The privilege of keeping God's law: that is the grace of chosenness which Judaism celebrates in its feasts and which shines through in Jewish congregational life. Christianity understands this very same Abraham differently in the wake of Paul: as the father of faith who trusts the word of promise and thus represents the new beginning which God also bestows through faith upon the uncircumcised, i.e., not only to the Jews, but also to the gentiles. For Islam, Abraham is the friend of God who was the first to convert to the worship of the true God, turning his back on all the idols of his original religion. The son promised to him was not Sarah's son Isaac (as Judaism and Christianity believe), but Ishmael, the first-born son of the maid. Together with him, Abraham founded the "holy house of God", the Kaaba, the point of daily orientation for pious submission under God.

Even though all three religions refer to the same person, Abraham, and to a common core of stories, in every one of them Abraham represents another fundamental religious conviction; each time he embodies, so to speak, a different sense of what it means to believe in God. In other words, the three monotheistic religions differ even in what they have in common: Abraham.

The same holds true for the peculiar understanding of God unique to each monotheistic confession. In the case of Christianity, the common bond and the differences become immediately apparent. When the Christian confession of faith fundamentally characterizes faith in "God the Father" (first article of the Apostles' Creed) by continuing with the formulation "and in Jesus Christ" (second article), it immediately makes itself conspicuous within the family of monotheistic religions, exposing itself to the criticism of failing to meet monotheistic standards. Christianity rejects the accusation that it reverts to belief in two or three Gods, and makes it clear that belief in the Triune God is the specifically Christian expression of monotheism. This cannot be discussed any further here, but even so it is abundantly clear that not even the shared conviction of the "oneness and uniqueness of God" is beyond dispute among the monotheistic religions. Thus the notion that all three believe in the same God remains an abstraction that disregards everything that really matters in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Empty abstractions thus prove to be of little help.

From a Christian perspective, it might be initially tempting to think that Judaism and Islam also refer to the true and only God, but do not (yet) identify him as the Father of Jesus Christ. Such a stance of "basically yes, but in the final analysis not quite yet" does not solve a single of the problems posed in the dialogue of religions. Such a

dialogue requires that the otherness of the other be earnestly recognized, and this is hampered rather than promoted by a well-intended integration. Such a hermeneutic offer to be lenient with the perceived incompleteness of the other fails to recognize that from the perspective of Judaism and Islam precisely the same diagnosis of a perceived deficiency can be projected conversely upon Christianity. Essentially, none of the three religions gains anything in plausibility when it embraces the notion that the other two religions already abide by the only God while remaining ignorant of crucial elements essential to him. Of course, everyone could verify their own conception of God as being adequate and attest that others possess only a partial approximation to God. But proceeding in this way does not promote dialogue.

## The encounter with Islam

In Islam we face the fact of a post-Christian religion in all its impressiveness. The Quran is connected to the Old and the New Testaments by a multitude of motifs and stories and it honors Jesus of Nazareth as an outstanding prophet. But Islam understands itself as a religion of complete submission to the one God, a religion that looks back at Judaism and Christianity as incomplete and deficient precursors. The recognition and hospitality which Christians experience in Islam are grounded in Muslim appreciation for the prophetic line which culminates in Mohammed. In contrast, most Muslims perceive Christian faith in the Crucified as apostate departure from pure monotheism. The triune understanding of the redemption of human beings by God and the affirmation premised by this understanding that God became incarnate in a human being is rarely perceived by Muslims as anything other than a repetition of the fundamental polytheistic error of "attaching" further deities to God.

Proximity and distance to Islam thus present themselves hand in hand, but under conditions different from those characterizing the relationship to Judaism. As clear-cut the *affinity between Christianity and Islam* is in the way both assert the fundamental difference between Creator and creature, warn against mixing up the two, and protest against idolizing the finite creature, and as much as they share a universal aspiration that contributes to the ethical relevance of piety and the cultural mark it leaves behind – despite these commonalities, they remain fundamentally separate, because their respective points of reference, the Quran and Jesus Christ, remain *heterogeneous*.

This is evident in the doctrine of God: through the ninety-nine names of God, the Quran promises believers his mercy, grace, omnipotence, and justice, inculcates human re-

sponsibility before God, and declares that salvation will be granted to the pious in the future judgment and the reprobate will be justly judged and punished. Similar affirmations have been made in one or the other way in Christendom. Yet these affinities and commonalities are qualified by Christians' conviction that redemption has already been consummated, that God has already reconciled the world with himself. This is precisely what makes the person of Jesus Christ so central for the Christian faith.

But other issues appear to be more urgent in the daily interaction between Christians and Muslims: the relationship between religion and law, between Islam and Islamism, but also the clash between tolerance and violence, traditional and modern lifestyles, emancipation and oppression, piety and theocracy. In the light of these problems, Islam is often experienced as a threat to the cultural identity of Europe.

The Evangelical church exercises its responsibility for the common polity by resisting any attempts to prejudge Muslims in our country by carelessly associating them with manifestations of Islam in non-European countries. For this reason, it underscores how much Europe is indebted to Islam historically and it welcomes the emergence of a distinctly Western Islam as an expression of acculturation and of its feeling increasingly at home in our midst. It combats the impression that its own confession of Jesus Christ is a relapse into a religious stage inferior to monotheism, but it also calls attention to the threat that endangers faith in the One God from within: when this faith is confronted with the question as to whether and how dissent, heterodoxy, and anything that is different (including, theologically speaking, enmity to God) are to be protected – or violently subjugated to the power of the One. Reconciliation remains for us the ultimate word of our religion, and we understand it as a gift conferred by God upon to those human beings who invest their vain efforts in being God's enemies. The Evangelical church seeks dialogue with Islam in order to discuss the foundations of religion and ethics, and it departs from the premise that the public impact of theology in a pluralistic society becomes particularly tangible in those situations in which interreligious dialogue leads the parties involved to gain a greater awareness of one another and become more mindful of one another.

## In particular: the relationship between Christians and Jews

The Evangelical church cannot place its relationship to Judaism simply on a par with its relationship to other religions or subordinate it to the latter as if it were the particular case of something more general. To be sure, all principles affirmed up to this point also hold true for this relationship. But the primary phenomenon here is not the factual

plurality of religions. On the contrary, everything that needs to be said here is cast in a different light by the fact that the Christian faith would not even exist without its enduring bond with the history of the Jewish people.

This becomes apparent already when considering the Scriptures. The church does not understand the Hebrew Bible as another religion's book, but holds its texts, as the Old Testament, to be the premises without which the New Testament would be incomprehensible. It thus holds on to a *shared foundation*, but complements it with four gospels, the Pauline and other epistles, as well as further texts and text genres, many of which for their part see themselves as interpreting the Jewish Torah, the texts of the Prophets or the so-called Writings (especially the Psalms and the book of Job). For this reason, the church cannot wish to hear the Word of God solely in the texts of the New Testament, for the latter itself calls on Christians to hold on to the connection of Old and New Testament, of Jewish and Christian canon: "You search the scriptures … it is they that testify on my behalf", says Jesus with regard to the texts of the synagogue (John 5:39).

But when Christians use the Scriptures today (after almost two thousand years of Christian interpretation of the Bible), they are aware of the hermeneutical fallacy it would mean to invoke Old Testament quotations in the New Testament as instances of unequivocal scriptural proof. Not even the Gospel of John denies that Jesus' claim "Moses wrote about me" (5:46b) did not make sense to the most learned readers of the Jewish people (5:46a and 47). One cannot describe the witness of Scripture as indisputable. But even where the New Testament holds on to the dissension between Jews and Christians, between synagogue and church, it makes use of hermeneutic means originating in Judaism, thus making sense out of the present with texts taken from the Jewish tradition. For example, Paul interprets the contradiction and refusal to agree he encounters by comparing them with Pharaoh's refusal to recognize Moses as God-sent (cf. Romans 11:25 with 9:18).

A paradox becomes evident here, and it consists of several aspects:
Even though Christianity was convinced of its own interpretation of Scripture, it did not lose view of the fact that Judaism read and understood the same texts differently. But it sought to overcome this contradiction with means based precisely on a consensus with Judaism. And where the synagogue came to identify its own binding canon in reaction to Christianity's understanding of Scripture, it was precisely on the basis of what it deemed to be deviations and misunderstandings that Judaism advanced in far-reaching ways. Thus Christians and Jews remain intertwined even in their dissension.

For centuries on end, the church blamed the missing endorsement of its message on Jewish unwillingness; today it has come to terms with the fact that there are, in fact, dissenting opinions and alternative interpretations. It summarizes it with the metaphor of the *double outcome of a (shared) collection of Scriptures*. The church itself understands the texts of the Old and New Testaments as mutually interdependent and reciprocally explanatory. But from the dissent of Judaism it learns that the traditional schemes of promise and fulfilment, prophecy and realization, archetype and image presuppose an unambiguousness entirely foreign to faith. The fact that Judaism cultivates its understanding of these texts within the horizon of rabbinic literature and other interpretations makes the church poignantly aware of the disputability of its own understanding of the word of God and confirms the need for a scholarly exegesis that protects the texts from being co-opted by contemporary agendas.

The paradox that identical texts can give rise to opposing, controversial interpretations and that Jews and Christians find their respective identity in dissent with one another cannot be solved by the church's assumption that it itself is the goal of God's salvation history while "Israel" has been abandoned to a history of calamity. To claim that the sole purpose of the election of Israel was to help bring about a New Covenant which found its realization in the church at Pentecost or that the people of Israel have been discarded by God for failing to recognize this fulfillment means dallying with the notion that the people of Israel have been superseded or replaced by the Christian church. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), reappraised and rectified this tradition in cooperation with the Protestant churches of Europe (in the 2001 document "Church and Israel" of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship) and in its series of studies "Christians and Jews" (I – III, 1975 – 2000). Such patterns of thinking rightly arouse suspicion in light of the experience with anti-Semitism and they particularly contradict what the church has to teach concerning the *faithfulness of God*. It is thus because of its own understanding of God and his promises that the church strives to renew its relationship to Judaism.

A corresponding inner relationship between Judaism and Christianity manifests itself in their concept of God. When Christians believe in God the Creator, who does not turn away from his world, but establishes the rule of justice and peace in it, then they trust in the *presence of God* as it became tangibly clear and recognizable *in the Jew Jesus of Nazareth*. That holds true for what Jesus taught and championed as well as for the manner in which he is remembered by his church as the crucified and resurrected one. In this respect, the Christian faith is rooted in the Jewish understanding of God – even while recognizing the Christ in Jesus and consequently the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father and thus going down paths that Judaism rejects.

Christianity may differ from Judaism by its *confession of Christ*, but one thing is clear: it believes no other God came into the world in Jesus of Nazareth than precisely the Creator of whom it testifies – together with Israel – as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and whom it believes to be the consummator of the world. Without God's history with Israel there is no Christianity. But without the history of Jesus, without his unique trust in the Father, his proclamation of God's nearness, his passion and his resurrection from the dead, there can be no Christian faith in the reliability of God's promises. Because of the history of Jesus, Christians can trust that God is faithful.

It is precisely because God's word has become trustworthy to them in this way that they also witness to Israel's enduring election. Admittedly: whoever recognizes God in the powerless figure hanging on the cross and cursed by God's utter remoteness can no longer make an ultimate distinction between Jews and Christians, between those within and those outside of the bounds of God's covenant. As affirmed in Galatians 3:28, the reconciliation of human beings through God in Christ contradicts the drawing of boundaries between circumcised and uncircumcised, between Torah piety and an ethics shaped by Greek thought, but it also contradicts any theologically disguised exclusions that seek to separate the people in Israel and Palestine. Faith in the Father of Jesus Christ therefore leads us to believe in Israel's enduring election *and* to the realization that God is the God of all human beings. The paradox that special nearness makes differences particularly evident also expresses itself in the fact that we stand up for the right of the State of Israel with all its citizens to live within its own boundaries in peace and security, yet rule out adopting theological interpretations of this right that seek to derive it directly from the promise to the patriarchs or from a holiness of the land.

The special relationship between the Church and Israel, between Christianity and Judaism also shapes our understanding of the *work of memory*. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) cannot clarify its rootedness in the texts of the Old Testament without constantly reminding itself that every denial of someone else's rights, every disparagement of someone else's faith can have destructive, even fatal effects. What began within Christian and also within Reformation theology as the failure to show religious tolerance lead to the exclusion of others, to pogroms, boycotts, deprivations of rights, and finally to the Shoah. It is indispensable that we continue remembering this history and reconstructing it with historical sensitivity and diligence – this will remain a task particularly entrusted to the church's educational institutions and to academic theology. We cannot absolve ourselves from this task by calling attention to the inadequacy of simplistic historical cause-and-effect derivations nor can we fulfill it by assuming that the elucidation of the historical context suffices in itself.

Awareness of its own history, of both open and latent Christian anti-Judaism, prohibits the Evangelical Church in Germany from regarding its relationship to Judaism as merely a specific instance of its acceptance of religious pluralism. It cannot subordinate this relationship to its broader attitude towards religious pluralism. This relationship is instead marked by memory work which began belatedly but vigorously in the past decades with theological declarations and the dedicated work of congregations, discussion groups, and church academies. The Church also calls on future generations to continue this work. The significance of this work of memory is also influenced by the fact that the church to this day remains fundamentally indebted to the religious spirit and the theological vigilance of Judaism and would no longer be capable of understanding itself if it discredited its own roots.

The Christian faith lives from roots connecting it to the Jewish faith. It expounds the belief that God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth and thus differs from Judaism. Yet how much the Christian faith has in common with Judaism becomes evident wherever a Christian congregation establishes cordial, open, and historically sensitive relationships to the local Jewish congregation and recognizes in it the origin of the Christian faith as well. Circumcision and baptism, the Eighteen Benedictions and the Lord's Prayer, Hanukkah and Christmas – in such affinities, a common bond becomes evident that is free of the urge to force one's convictions upon others.

For the paradoxes of mutual perception are precisely expressions of a *nearness that couples affinity with distance*. In this regard, the church's relationship to Judaism touches on its very own essence and provides the vantage point from which it assesses and understands religious pluralism as a whole. To be sure, Christians respond to the Jewish premises and roots indispensable to their faith differently from how Jews would be naturally inclined to do. This exposes limits to mutual understanding, something we should not only not find surprising, but which also helps us recognize the finitude of human insight. For if something that relates to one's religious roots appears compelling and irresistibly convincing to some but untenable to others, this means that living together with members of other faiths will be not just marked by consensus; it will be characterized just as much by an awareness of difference. The ascertainment that there are constitutive differences between religions does not give one a green light to utter derogatory judgments over other faiths. Because of this, we rejoice over every emergence of a common understanding of those points over which we disagree.

# Conclusion: the tasks of a theology of religions

The church faces a crucial challenge: it must decide which paths it shall pursue in the dialogue of religions within the horizon of its understanding of Scripture and in contemporary accountability to the confessions of the Reformation. One finds in Protestant theology a number of different models that offer a response to this challenge. The competition between these models is an indication of how urgent the tasks facing us are, and in many cases it is an expression of concrete experience gained in the course of dialogue – experience that has had formative influence on the theology of religions or on interreligious hermeneutics. But no one would dare to claim or contend before congregations and church representatives that these alternatives are already so thought-out and complete that the Church can commit itself to a specific model.

What is clear, however, is that the significance of religions in a pluralistic society depends crucially on whether or not these religions develop a theology that is accountable to the public sphere and facilitates mutual understanding and communication between confessions, religions, and differing worldviews. Citizens who do not belong to any religious group or have no acquaintance with religious faith, yet still wish to assume joint responsibility with the churches in working for peace between religions and for the future of the common good, are also invited to join the dialogue. Theology and the church stand by the obligation of religions to explain and account for themselves. This religious accountability cannot be arbitrated and shaped from the bird's-eye vantage point of a science of religion claiming to hover above all standpoints. It lives rather from explaining its own faith and expounding its reasons and ethical convictions. This is why we have presented in broad outline the tasks of a theology of religions as currently faced by Protestant churches. Our goal in doing so is to encourage Christians to be honest and outspoken in a way befitting to the freedom of a Christian. The church need not be misled by false alternatives or constraints. It is bound not to any particular model of the theology of religions but to the gospel which called it into being.

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