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SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



BETWEEN FASCINATION AND INCOMPREHENSION
WHAT GLASSES DO WE WEAR TO VIEW THE MIDDLE EAST?



EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools

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Dear Reader,

“The Middle East is fascinating.” I presume many of you will agree with me on this point. What pictures do we think of when we talk about the Middle East and try to explain what is happening in the region? Do these pictures correspond with reality? Or do we perhaps project something that has nothing much to do with the reality of the people living there?

These are the questions we are dealing with in this issue. The starting point is Edward Said’s classic work “Orientalism” which I re-read for you. Uwe Gräbe describes how unrealistic many expectations are that are voiced at educational institutions in the Middle East. And Gerhard Arnold shows how different views about the Syrian war can be. Simon Jacob discusses the consequences of the digital revolution in the Middle East and focuses on a topic that has so far been neglected. When it comes to images, one major topic must not be left out: the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is becoming more and more difficult to talk about it. Nevertheless, Uwe Gräbe and I will do so. We have both written articles on this subject. They complement each other precisely because we have different opinions. There is never only one side to any topic.

The three volunteers working at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman also make their contribution to this issue. They report about what it is like to find one’s way in a foreign society. We are also delighted that Jakob Eisler uncovered another piece in the mosaic of Schneller history in this issue. He tells the story of Mina Wörner who once worked as cook at the Syrian Orphanage. Finally, Gabriele Mayer reports on the ordination of Rima Nasrallah who is now the third female pastor in the Middle East.

We hope that this issue is an exciting read for you. We look forward to your feedback which always helps us take a sharper view of the Middle East.

Many greetings on behalf of the editorial team

Yours



Katja Dorothea Buck



STARLIT SKY OF THE EAST

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matthew 2:1-2 NRSV)

The Epiphany starts with this old familiar story. For many centuries, the "Three Kings of the Orient" are linked to cheerful customs. In Germany, children dress up as they imagine people from the Orient to be like. They merrily go from door to door with their "Rummelpott" (string drum), as they say in North Germany. They collect sweets and sometimes raise money for a good cause. In South Germany they are called "Sternsinger" (star singers or carol singers), wandering from door to door. They write the letters "C+M+B" in chalk on the front door of every house, which means "Christus Mansionem Benedicat" – "Christ bless this house". Of course, many people in Germany think that the letters "C+M+B" refer to the names which Western Christians have given to the men from the east: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But generally, the atmosphere is marked by joyfulness, blessing and exoticism. It is a beautiful custom. But it is a far cry from the story in the New Testament and even further away from the reality of those times or the present. Indeed, the "far cry" may perhaps even colour the Western ear when it hears to the story from Matthew.

How can we come closer to reality? A more careful examination of the passage reveals that the men from the East are wise men, not kings. They could be stargazers or astrologers. The term could also refer to members of the priestly caste of Zoroastri-

anism. The religion of Zarathustra started in the first millennium before Christ in present-day Iran. It is mainly a universalistic, monotheistic faith with high ethical principles. To this day, Zoroastrianism has devotees in Northern Iraq and in Iran, where they are brutally persecuted. The story in Matthew is accompanied by a chilling undertone, in other words, Herod's murderous intent. It led to the massacre of infants on a par with the deeds of the Pharaoh in Egypt. The environment into which the King of Love, of reconciliation and of peace and worshipped by men from the Orient, was born into a world of persecution, violence and murder. It is true of those times but often of the present, too.

Here is another point of view. If we pursue the track of the ancient religion of Zarathustra, we come across many other religions which have been traditionally located in the Middle East for centuries or even millennia. The Jewish community in Iraq is the oldest in the Orient; Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans, Armenians and Copts belong to the first peoples who adopted the Christian faith. The face of a diverse culture is composed of Mandeans, Bahai, Yezidi, Alawites, Alevi, Shabak, Druze, Samaritans, Karaites, Zoroastrians and of course Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The Middle East is rich, creative, spiritually fertile in spite of the fact that its cultural heritage is threatened today as seldom before. This is precisely why the world between Iran and North Africa should not be seen as an Arab-Islamic monoculture. It simply isn't!

Thirdly: Our elder sisters and brothers in the Oriental churches have developed

their own understanding of the Christian faith with meaningful liturgies and traditions. They could rekindle the Western view of the Bible, Jesus Christ and Christian “mission”. The star that guided the Magi to Bethlehem could cast a new light on our Western Christianity. For example, the Assyrian Church of the East knows the names of twelve Magi from the “Orient”. Twelve Magi, twelve apostles, twelve tribes – a very biblical reading of Matthew 2.

And finally, people come to us from the East today – mainly from Iran – cutting off all ties with their past, just like Abraham and Sara. Why they left, we do not know. But at least many of them act as if they had seen a star that they are following. They do not profess any faith, they do not

know bible passages by heart or say grace at meals. “They fail to give any impression of an identity-forming orientation towards Christianity,” is the assessment of the German Federal Agency of Migration and Refugees in an increasing number of cases. The Christian church should not leave them alone. Indeed, they should accept them even more in its midst.

Hanna Lehming is pastor and Middle East Secretary at the Centre for Mission and Ecumenism of the Northern Church in Hamburg.



“The Three Magi”, mosaic at the Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna

LESS STEREOTYPES PLEASE!

A book re-read: “Orientalism” by Edward W. Said

What glasses do we wear to view the Middle East? How do we explain what is happening in countries such as Egypt or Syria? In view of the many misunderstandings between what we are usually call East and West, self-reflection is a necessary exercise. Edward Said entreated us to do exactly this 40 years ago.

The Middle East is one of the few regions for which there are so many experts. Despite the plausibility of their analyses, their differences cover a wide range. On the other hand, politicians make decisions which few can understand. This is the basis for statements such as these: “The Middle East is so complex; it is impossible to understand.” This point would be the right time to disengage and leave the Middle East to the experts and politicians. The other option would be to take the classic work down from the bookshelf and read “Orientalism” by Edward Said (1935-2003) once again.

The book written by the American literary theoretician from a Christian Palestinian background was published in 1978 and was the source of much world-wide controversy. In his work, Said examines how European academics (“Orientalists”) perceived their research object, the Orient, in the 19th and 20th centuries. He shows how this perception was influenced by colonialism and Islamophobia. When referring to the Eurocentric, Western perception of societies in the Arab world, Said describes Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”. This idea is

shaped by a feeling of superiority over the Orient and is a part of the modern political and intellectual culture of the present day. The “civilized West” is compared with “the mysterious Orient”. As a result of this construct, the West denies the Orient any form of self-representation and this precludes a true understanding of the cultures.



A classic cliché of the Orient that has very little to do with reality: “Harem Pool”, painting by the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)

Today, we have not really come any further from understanding what is happening in the Middle East. So, it is legitimate to ask whether this lack of comprehension is actually based only on the current dynamics which are changing the region so rapidly that everything looks so confusing. Or should we perhaps examine our glasses which we don to view the Middle East?

When the Arabellion swept from Tunisia over into Egypt in 2011, European media and experts imagined that the people living on the Nile were well on their way to democracy. It would have been wonderful to see the dream of a peaceful revolution becoming reality there. But in a rapidly growing society in which 40 percent of adults are illiterate and a quarter of the population lives in extreme poverty, it needs more than a few demonstrations on Tahrir Square to make room for democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood who made no contribution to the revolution won the first free elections. When the second revolution was quickly crushed with the support of the military, Western democracy experts turned away disappointed by the paradigm that was presumed to herald transitional processes. Egypt just did not fit into the Western model that explains democratic theory.

It was a similar story in Syria. Originally, people went onto the streets demanding freedom and dignity. The West translated this into demands for democracy. At that time, Syrian Christians already issued warnings of the risk that Islamic groups could exploit the power vacuum. The West merely acknowledged this with a denigrating smile saying that such a declaration had succumbed to the trickeries of Assad's propaganda machine which had always

blocked the implementation of real reforms by conjuring up the spectre of Jihadism. It took a long time before observers in the West finally recognised that the fuzzy term of "rebels" not only referred to the opposition against Assad but also Jihadists who were financed from abroad.

And what about human rights? They were trampled underfoot with even greater force than in Egypt or in Syria. It is so easy to plead for the observance of human rights in the Middle East when one is sitting in a cosily heated office in peaceful Europe. It is just as easy to formulate priorities on what must first happen to democratise societies in the Middle East. But then we stereotype the whole region and the people living there – just as the Orientalists did in the past. We presume we can speak on their behalf. We allow ourselves to explain to them how everything should run "properly".

There is truly a need for more experts who listen and who can question their conception of the world in order to really understand the cultures there. The wish remains that they will find indigenous interlocutors who do not tell them from the very beginning: "The Middle East is so complex. It is impossible to understand it from outside."

Katja Dorothea Buck

“WE’VE BEEN FORGOTTEN BY THE WEST”

Different perceptions of the war in Syria

Christians and their church leaders in Syria now look back on eight years of war in their country, on untold suffering, half a million dead and millions of displaced people and refugees who have fled abroad. In addition to all this suffering there is another far greater concern: they feel themselves forgotten, abandoned, misunderstood and sold out. A tough accusation! But when it comes to the part about forgetting, it is sadly true.

The German public followed by the media show very little interest for Christians in the Near and Middle East. This accusation cannot be levelled at church media and special church information services. But their reach is minimal. It is different when it comes to accusations that Western church circles had no idea about the actual situation in Syria or that they were judged to be extremely one-sided. Let us address this topic by asking four questions.

1. The Syrian Christians and Assad

For the umpteenth time in the past few years, German media have accused Syrian church leaders of being Assad adherers without so much as a glance at the horrific crimes of the autocratic ruler. Is that correct? The fundamental conviction held by all church leaders and most Christians in the country is this: ‘If the Assad Regime were to break apart under the assault of the Jihadists, it would mean the rapid end of Syrian Christianity.’ Sadly, this statement is correct. The Baath system in Syria is tolerant of religions and is more or less

still functioning. The churches have benefited from it for decades. The churches need Assad in order to survive. But this is a far cry from saying that they like him. At the end of September, the Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo, said the following without being arrested by the secret police: “I respect the point of view of European who say that Assad is a dictator and a murderer.” But Assad will still be needed for a certain length of time to negotiate an interim solution. This voice also deserves to be listened to.

2. Who is to blame for the Syrian war?

If you have ever had the chance to speak to Syrian refugees here in Germany, you will not forget too easily the experiences of oppression they relate and their suffering from their brothers or cousins tortured to death. They all say that there can be no future for Syria with Assad, the mass murderer. But most church leaders in Syria see things differently. At the end of 2017, the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Youssef III Younan said the following: “Western politicians in alliance with countries in the region that are known as the most undemocratic and backward-oriented [Saudi Arabia is meant here] have continuously stoked the fires of religious conflicts and financed terrorist groups in the name of Allah.” The accusation in a sentence: ‘The West is to blame for the Syrian catastrophe.’ It is also often maintained that the USA is only interested in Syrian crude oil and natural gas. An absurd idea.

3. Uncritical admiration of Syrian and Russian warfare

On 30 September 2015, the Russian Air Force started massive bombing runs against various rebel group positions to stop and repulse the advance of the so-called Islamic State combat troops. This was greeted with unanimous praise from most Syrian church leaders. At the battle of Aleppo which raged from the summer up to 13 December 2016, about 30,000 people lost their lives. In the main, the Syrian church leaders not only mourned the suffering of Christians in West Aleppo who were indeed mercilessly shot at by Jihadists from East Aleppo; they turned a blind eye to the destruction caused by the Syrian and Russian Air Forces or to the starving of the roughly 300,000 inhabitants there. But they categorically rejected sorties against IS groups by Western air forces.

4. The battle of East Ghouta

The final battle for the rebel stronghold that started in the North-East district of Damascus raged from January to April 2018. In the end, the conflict claimed about 1,600 lives and way over 5,000 injured over this period. The Western media published regular daily reports about the suffering of the besieged people exposed to continuous bombardment. At the same time, the eastern half of Damascus received massive mortar fire from East Ghouta almost daily. Almost all the churches in the old part of the city were hit countless times and several dozen Christians were presumed dead and over a hundred were injured. But there were absolutely no reports about all this in German media. It



Photo: Stefan Rammelt

Aleppo 2018: A church in a district that was mainly inhabited by Alevis and Christians. The church was located directly on the front line for a long time.

was a different story in the United Kingdom and the USA. Many Syrian church leaders complained bitterly about this but their criticism was much too general. The low level of appreciation demonstrated by western Christians and media confirms the impression they have held for a long time.

These four thematic examples show profound differences in the perception of the Syrian tragedy and church actions there and here in Germany. The two large churches in Germany are aware of the extreme polarities in perception and have therefore reacted with conscious silence for many years. Indeed, the intention is to maintain church contacts with Syria to the

best of their abilities, especially through visits and by sending humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, the many political statements made by Syrian church leaders result every time in incomprehension and perplexity.

Gerhard Arnold is a Protestant theologian and contemporary journalist specialising in the plight of Christians in the Near and Middle East.



Photo: Stefan Rammelt

A lot of war damage can only be seen close up. The grey weld across the chest of the statue of the Patriarch in Homs shows the unlimited hate of the Jihadists for everything Christian.

FREEDOM FROM AN ABSOLUTIST IMAGE OF GOD

When young people question God and the world

I am a Christian and saw the light of day in South-East Anatolia in 1978. In 1980, my parents fled to Germany in the wake of ethnic tensions and religious discrimination. Since then, almost forty years have passed and the world has changed rapidly. But not for my parents.

My parents are religious people. They belong to the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. For them, the time from their escape to Germany to now is like a quantum leap of several hundred years – they left a village where electricity was just being installed and TV was regarded as a technical wonder and they were catapulted into a highly technological, digitised and globally networked world. Today, the children of that time are now entrepreneurs, engineers, doctors, skilled workers, philosophers or artists. They jet around the world, make discoveries and enjoy to the full a secular world of maximum freedom. What still connects the past to the present and what still links our generation to our parents is the Christian faith – not to mention a rudimentary knowledge of the language and the wonderful cuisine. But even digitisation and globalisation does not stop at this.

My parents live one floor above me and we love having long talks. I notice that when my father in particular speaks to me, he tries to tell me something that is full of fears and worries. We often sit at the table in the kitchen and he speaks about what it was like in his homeland when he looked after the herds of sheep as the eld-

est son of the family, when he was in the mountains in the snow and rain, often alone for several days, or when he learnt how to read and write by himself from newspaper scraps. His eyes mist over when he plunges very deep into a world which is totally foreign to me, my brothers and sisters and the people around me. My father colours all his words with the essence of his faith. Full of awe and wonder, he tells stories about the Christian saints and their deeds, sometimes with quotations from the bible.

“If we had been told then that there would be things like smartphones today, we would have thought the storyteller was mad,” says my father sometimes. My mother, a woman full of love for her children, for people, for the faith, once added that she did not understand the technology behind the smartphone but she knew very well that it was the gateway to the world, to another world.

How right she is! My mother and father know very well that their world is changing from the way they used to think, live, communicate and practise their faith. It was clear to them that many things would change with the onset of new means of communication. And they accepted it. But the world around them, their children, gradually became unknown to them.

If you were to ask my parents as faithful Christians whether all these technologies have made the world better or worse, they would probably not find everything positive. They see the hate, the anger, the coldness between people that is often linked to ignorance; they see the lack of



Photo: Stefan Rammelt

Homs 2016: The mosque and the church in the Hamdiyeh district of Homs were both targets for bombs and grenades. What will the future bring to the city and its residents?

time and of human contact. That's the reason why they worry. They too miss order in the system of believing, of religion and Christianity. Their way of believing, of feeling spirituality and following the teaching of Christianity is still linked to an absolutist and centric image of God.

In the Christianity that my parents know and how I was taught when I was young, God is a loving creator who sacrificed His son for us out of love for His creatures and therefore Himself. We derive, I derive my Christian existence from this willingness to make sacrifices, strengthened in the belief that all life is valuable and should be loved. Right through to the aspect of forgiveness. In fact, without forgiveness we cannot break the spiral of violence and retaliation. So far, so good. But the idea of an absolutist God who sits at the top of a chain of command, who

transfers his power to acting rulers on Earth who then pass on competencies to their institutions all the way down to ordinary citizens and believers who are not allowed to question this power; this image of God does not function any more.

The internet with its immense communication technologies overwhelms us with all kinds of information. A young generation is developing an immense thirst for knowledge – and is asking questions – uncontrolled, far removed from the fetters of censorship which state institutions exert in non-democratic regions. This generation is questioning the right of rulers to rule over everything and is also placing doubt on the institutional church. This not only widens the gulf between generations but also the relationship to God.

It is associated with the question of how we are to continue in the faith. It

applies to both East and West in equal measure. Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp provide vehicles to allow more debate on the issues of faith. But it also allows for more criticism. For example, a Lutheran meets an Orthodox person and they both conduct an open debate which is accessible to anyone; on issues whether women priests should be allowed; or why homosexuality is a major hurdle for many denominations; or the importance of connections between politics and the church, especially in autocratic countries.

This is no different among many young movements in Islam. On my trips to the Middle East, I have often witnessed young Muslims openly criticising clerics head-on and questioning the right of clerics to rule, especially when it comes to politics. Sometimes, my heart skips a beat from sheer astonishment; for example, in Kerbala, the holy city of the Iraqi Shiites, in March 2018. At a meeting with a high priest, a young man, nephew of the attending sheikh, stood up and said demonstratively to my camera that he was an atheist and he heaped blame on the clerics as they did not allow any criticism of religion. “As a citizen of Iraq, I have the freedom to express criticism of politics and religion,” he said.

Many young people in the region think the same way. Facebook and co have shown them the freedom that a functioning democracy has to offer. This creates a gulf between them and their parents’ generation. But they also seek new ways in faith, perhaps based on the reasoning of “How long are we supposed to follow traditional ways and kill each other – Shiites against Sunnites, Muslims against Christians, one tribe against another... ?!” Yes, there’s no doubt that the young genera-

tion is highly technological. But they also thirst for spirituality. And this not only applies to young people in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. It also applies to young people in the West.

Simon Jacob is Chair of the Central Council for Oriental Christians in Germany (ZOCOD) and initiator of the project Peacemaker for which he has travelled extensively in the Middle East and has written a book on this topic. (see page 30)



Photo: Oannes Consulting

Simon Jacob (right) with Father Joseph from the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of Mar Mattai on the Nineveh plains in Iraq.

WHEN ONE PERSON KNOWS WHAT THE OTHER NEEDS...

When Europeans want to realise their own perception of the Orient

In the Middle East, educational institutions increasingly see themselves confronted with great ideas of foreign donors. These ideas often bear a core of truth in them. But as everywhere else in the world, the context is the decisive factor. And of course, the context in the Middle East is different than in Germany.

Hairdressing, cosmetics and catering trades – of all Things! During the long management crisis at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS), the many international partners thought long and hard about new sustainable training courses

for the future. One of the suggestions that came up was specialisations in the digitisation sector. Another idea under discussion was to revive the traditional art of stone masonry at the TSS. Ultimately, this was needed to restore the cultural heritage of the destroyed cities in Syria. Our Jordanian partners listened to all these ideas with great courtesy – then rolled up their sleeves, reopened the existing workshops (carpentry, metal workshop and car workshop) and extended the vocations offered by the traditional training courses mentioned at the beginning. Very few of the suggestions made by the European partners were adopted.



Photo: EMS/Martina Waiblinger

Instead of starting totally new training courses, the decision-makers at the TSS decided to re-open the existing workshops.

Foreign visitors are always full of interest and commitment and they love going to one of the educational institutions in the Middle East formerly founded by members of European churches. In itself, this is a good sign. They are often “impressed”. But very soon come suggestions about all the things that could be improved. At the end of their visits, one person writes a study on the possible further development of the boarding home; another discusses vocational education. And there again, a group of Korean, European and Jordanian visitors would like to support oppressed Christians in the Middle East. “You know, these Muslims...,” whispers a friendly lady at evening meal without realising that it is the conscious purpose of Schneller schools for Muslims and Christians to live and learn together. This group prays the whole day for the oppressed brothers and sisters of the faith; ecstatic cries of “Hallelujah” can be heard from an upstairs room.

Shortly afterwards, a small academic delegation appears wanting to enquire about progress in the Christian-Muslim dialogue. Our Arab partners prove once again to be excellent hosts. “Of course, our Christian religion teacher and Muslim religion teacher meet regularly to coordinate their work,” I retorted in explanation. “Sometimes, they even fill in for each other.” The friendly academics are satisfied.

The team leader of another group finds it admirable that so many Syrian refugees have been accepted in Jordan. There is all the more reason to help. This is why volunteers come to the country every two weeks; they distribute relief supplies in refugee camps for a few days and offer English courses or ball games. Then they

go on a short tourist trip around Jordan. After they leave, it’s time for the next group of volunteers to go to the refugees. “The Germans and Swiss love working with refugees,” explains a local co-worker at the school. “We give them the chance and they are willing to pay for it.”

So much energy and commitment for a good cause! But the question remains how far the local partners are prepared to accept the role of providing rooms and infrastructure so that Europeans can realise their own perception of the Orient. Edward Said calls this “Orientalism”.

But what happens if everything is more down to earth than in our perceptions and ideas? What if the local people responsible stopped trying to be educational “lighthouses”? And instead if it was just enough for Christian and Muslim children from the fringe of society to simply share a totally normal life together at the boarding home? And if in the end they gain low level access to the labour market as trained hairdressers, beauticians and waiters – instead of joining the swelling ranks of the unemployed?

Johann Ludwig Schneller expressed all this in a very simple way: “So that they can eat their bread in dignity.” And this is why we, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools, support the initiatives of our local partners – instead of coming up with things that we think would be good for them.

Uwe Gräbe

ANGRY COMMENTS INSTEAD OF DISCUSSION

The controversy about the Middle East conflict has reached an impasse

At a conference in September 2018, the Protestant Academy in Bad Boll intended to discuss why more and more events, criticizing Israeli politics, were being cancelled. In the end, the Academy itself was accused of anti-Semitism. It is hardly possible to talk about the Middle East conflict any more in Germany.

There have always been conferences on the Israeli-Palestine conflict at the Protestant Academy Bad Boll. The organisers know full well that it is impossible to please everyone all of the time. But the angry comments that was unleashed shortly before the conference “Crisis in the ability to dialogue – Shrink-ing spaces in the Israel-Palestine conflict” was supposed to start in September exceeded all fears. The Academy received vehement protests from the “Werteinitiative Jüdisch-deutsche Positionen” (Values Initiative Jewish-German Positions) and the American Jewish Congress in Berlin which described the conference in a twitter feed as “a platform for hate”. The former Member of the Bundestag Volker Beck wrote a long unpleasant email accusing the Academy of encouraging “anti-Semitic movements”.

The Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism, Dr Felix Klein, requested the cancellation of the conference since “anti-Israeli narrative” would be expressed there. He had not even contacted the Academy before-hand to obtain first-hand information about the event. In the end, the Deutsch-Is-

raelische Gesellschaft Heilbronn-Unter-land (German-Israeli Society in the Heilbronn Region) appealed to the Bishop of Württemberg to evaluate the “anti-Israeli structures and mechanisms residing under the roof of the Protestant Academy Bad Boll”. The statement appealed to him to “conduct a public and transparent investigation of the actual state of affairs with the aim of immediately stopping any extremist activities there!”

A number of German-speaking daily newspapers reported that the Academy was planning a “rendezvous for enemies of Israel”. Indignation even swept across the Mediterranean. The Jerusalem Post wrote a long article for its Israeli readership that “the who’s who of the German supporters of Hamas and Hezbollah and supporters of the boycott campaign” intended to meet in Bad Boll to make a world-wide appeal to start a boycott, dis-investments and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. The newspaper requested Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre to make a comment. Promptly came the statement that it was scandalous that a Christian church in Germany was exploiting its moral



authority “to organise an event which would legitimate those who wanted to destroy more than six million Jews in Israel”.

The conference in Bad Boll is not an isolated incident. For several years, events on the topic of the Middle East conflict at which protagonists of Israel critics are to appear have become increasingly controversial. It is notable that it is always the same names and organisations that take to the field with public accusations and insinuations. Credit should be given to the Academy that it did not cancel the conference despite pressure from all sides. According to statements made by various participants the conference took place in a focused and concentrated atmosphere. In fact, there was only one case of an inappropriate interruption involving anti-Israeli statements which conference organisers immediately suppressed.

It would be possible to criticise the conference since the list of speakers was overly focused on the side of Palestine. According to statements from Bad Boll, the organisers made every effort in the run-up to the conference to seek the

right balance of speakers. However, all the representatives of pro-Israeli circles who were invited, for example the Deutsch-israelische Gesellschaft, informed the organisers during preparations for the conference, that they had no need to discuss the subject of the ability to dialogue in the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Requests sent to members of parliament of the major parties and representatives of the cities of Munich, Frankfurt and Berlin which had banned anti-Israeli events in recent months failed to receive any response. Nobody wants to get their fingers burnt again by touching upon this subject.

In the end, the originators of the angry comments achieved exactly what they wanted: no more public discussion about the Middle East conflict. Meanwhile, it is enough to allege that someone is supporting the BDS campaign to brand them with the accusation of anti-Semitism. It is almost impossible to get rid of this accusation in Germany in view of its historical guilt.

However, if controversial issues are no longer discussed and are even shouted down or hushed up, this is tantamount to a betrayal of every democratic principle in existence. Democracy lives from discussion. It does not mean that everyone must have the same opinion in the end. But it is a mark of cowardice to avoid entering into a discussion. Or can it be that the angry comments protagonists have run out of arguments in view of the massive human rights violations against Palestinians in Israeli-occupied territories?

Katja Dorothea Buck

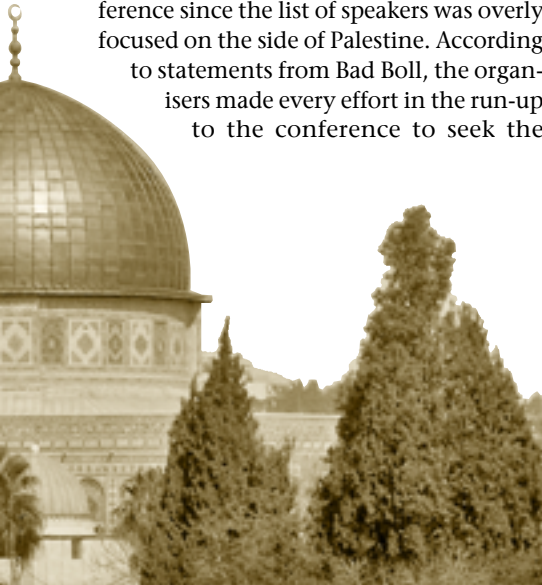


Photo: Uwe Gräbe

NO PUBLIC DEBATE WITHOUT TRUST

Background talks are more helpful than a heated public debate

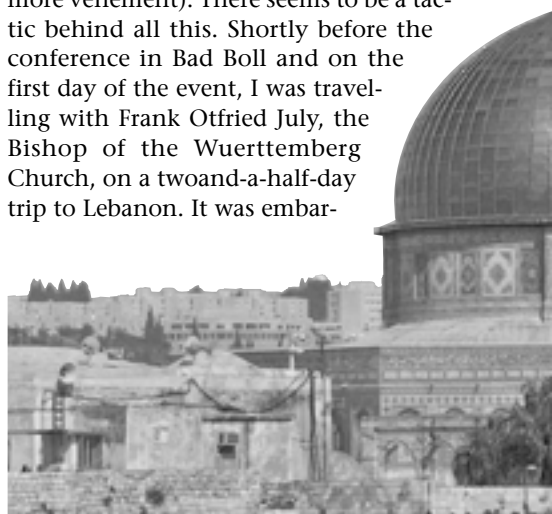
Are the many debates on Israel and Palestine nothing more than the debaters processing their own past experiences? It is difficult to find out who has what intention in a particular debate. Whatever the fact of the matter is, knee-jerk decisions are of little help.

It is a curious contradiction. On the one hand, many event organisers complain about the cancellation of their conference rooms up and down the country whenever critical debates on Israeli settlement policy are planned. On the other hand, there seems to be hardly any other topic that is publicly discussed with as much passion as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the meantime, an exhibition entitled the “Flight and Expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948”, which was widely called the “controversial” Nakba exhibition, has already appeared at about 150 venues. I know of few exhibitions with a similar format that have achieved such a wide circulation! In December 2016, the outgoing UN General Secretary appeared before the Security Council. He complained that the United Nations had been significantly hampered in exercising its role in the world efficiently due to a “disproportionately” high number of “resolutions, reports and committees” that had been directed against Israel over the previous years.

Indeed, it is certainly detrimental to democracy when committed people are denied the room for open debate. But it also seems to me that there are people who seek room for public debate in order

to be able to air all the thoughts they ever harboured against Jews – but have never dared to say before – by expressing them in a cultivated “criticism of Israel”. And I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that individual Jews of either gender from the left fringe of the political spectrum are standing up for human rights in Israel with enormous commitment, passion and personal dedication and that they are being misused by such “Israel critics” to camouflage their real intentions.

At first glance, it is often impossible to say who is leading which debate and what their intentions are. In this case, it needs time, patience and persistent questioning – but no “knee-jerk decisions” under any circumstances. I have noticed that many events announced in the press many weeks or even months in advance have been attacked only a few days before they take place (and the attack is then all the more vehement). There seems to be a tactic behind all this. Shortly before the conference in Bad Boll and on the first day of the event, I was travelling with Frank Otfried July, the Bishop of the Wuerttemberg Church, on a two-and-a-half-day trip to Lebanon. It was embar-



rassing to experience the way in which the Bishop was suddenly requested by many different interest groups in Germany to make a statement on the spot. In my opinion, it was the most reasonable thing he could do to step back from the situation, concentrate on the trip he was undertaking and request a delay to the debate.

In the end, it appears to me that for the most part, debates such as these have nothing to do with Israel and Palestine and that they are even totally irrelevant to what is happening in Israel or Palestine. In fact, there is no shadow of doubt that right-wing populist forces are present in the Israeli government to a great extent and they are working towards curtailing the rights of large population groups bit by bit. By the way, this is also true in Italy, Hungary, Poland and the USA. So, whoever is supporting a boycott of Italy, Hungary, Poland and the USA may also want to consider taking similar action when it comes to Israel.

But that's hardly what it's all about. On the contrary, it appears to me that many debates have more to do with past experiences of the debaters. Might it not be that many of those who

are vehemently dedicated to the one or other side of the inner-German Middle East debate are in reality processing the roles of their fathers (and sometimes their mothers) at the time of the murder of the Jews by National Socialists? That they – in whatever way it may be – want to stand finally “on the right side”?

However, the “right side” is never something static and can only be regained in dynamic processes. I remember a long train journey across Germany when I happened to be sitting next to a well-known rabbi. Publicly, the rabbi had always defended the state of Israel against every criticism. But in a confidential conversation, it turned out that we (as two non-Israelis) had quite a few heated discussions about numerous draft Israeli laws and the positions of several Israeli politicians – but that we totally agreed on the fact that there was nothing good to say about them.

And wherever trust has grown, that it's all about the cause – and not any kind of resentment – the open debate is not only possible, but more or less self-evident. To rebuild this kind of trust every time must therefore be in the interests of those who champion free speech. Perhaps many background discussions in camera are more helpful than a heated public debate.

Uwe Gräbe

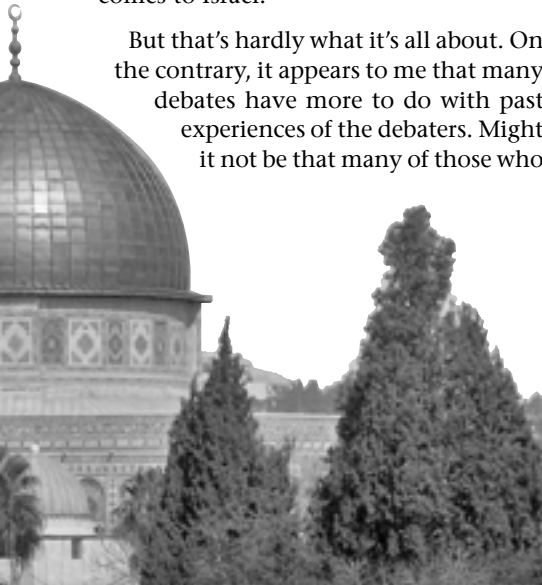


Photo: Uwe Gräbe

JUST TO BEAM ONESELF TO GERMANY

The three volunteers at the TSS in Amman report

Lisa Luka Kollert, Lisa Schnotz and Felix Thier have been volunteers at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman since the autumn. They are living in a society whose language and rules they must first learn, which takes some time. This is one thing they have in common with the many hundreds and thousands of refugees who have come to Germany over the past few years. Meanwhile, the three are very well aware of the privileges they enjoy as Europeans living abroad.

Of course, the comparison between the situation of refugees who were forced to leave their homes in fear of their lives and young people from Germany who are spending a year abroad after graduating from school is not quite correct. But the three volunteers at the TSS know very well what it feels like when they do not understand a word. “Sometimes I feel lonely or even isolated when no-one around me speaks my language or I can’t even express myself in Arabic,” says Lisa Schnotz. It is precisely at times when things don’t go quite right because of the language barrier that she sorely misses the ability to simply make herself understood or to understand what people are saying to her. For example, in class “when the girls are very loud and I don’t know the right word to get their attention.”

Sometimes, the hand gestures and reactions of Jordanians are different than in Germany. This can lead to misunderstandings. “For example, when the girls I look after click their tongues and raise their



Photo: EMS/TSS

The three volunteers at the TSS (from left to right): Lisa Schnotz, Lisa Luka Kollert and Felix Thier

eyebrows instead of saying “No, thank you!”, which is what I expect. When it first happened, I interpreted it as extremely disrespectful,” says Lisa Luka Kollert. After a while, I noticed that this mannerism was perfectly normal in Jordan and meant no disrespect at all.

Sometimes, it is difficult to understand situations and this may quickly lead to prejudices. “When I go out on the streets, people I don’t know just come up and speak to me, mostly because I look different and this attracts their attention,” says Felix Thier. In many cases, people are just curious. But it has happened many times that people follow him with ulterior motives. “For example, one man recently spoke to me. Later, it turned out that all he wanted was for me to get him a visa for Germany.” That has happened to him several times. Now he is wary whenever people speak to him and this he regrets. “My

wariness is based on a prejudice. But it is often not confirmed at all," says Felix Thier.

One issue that constantly concerns the volunteers is adapting and integrating. "I try more or less to adapt to my surroundings," says Lisa Luka Kollert. But there are some things that she doesn't want to give up. For example, the attitude that as a girl, she also has the strength to lift a water cannister. This is why each person must find their own limits between adapting and staying different. "Both sides can learn from many differences – for example when it comes to food. I love falafel now and my colleagues have come to appreciate biscuits and Donauwelle cake!" she says.

But despite everything to do with adapting and reflecting, there are still situations when uncertainty crops up. "When I walk along the street alone, people often speak to me but I almost always

ignore them," says Lisa Schnotz. Then she notices that her whole posture changes. "I often walk very upright and I'm very careful how I walk so that I don't stumble." When she visits Arab friends in the neighbouring area, it takes her about half an hour by bus. "I always meet incredibly nice people who also help me. But sadly, on every bus trip, people from passing cars shout things at me," she says.

But what helps after things like this happen is talking to friends. "It always helps me when I can talk to Luka and Felix in the evening after going through a day with quite a few uncertainties. The two put it all into the proper perspective and then everything is half as complicated as it seemed before," she says.

What all three find interesting is the way the Jordanians see Germany. "Since I've been here, I have become more and more aware of my identity and where I come from," says Lisa Schnotz. Almost



Photo: EMS/TSS

Lisa Luka Kollert (left) with girls at the TSS

everywhere she goes, people ask where she comes from. "When I say I'm from Germany, they often reply with a compliment to Angela Merkel, on how beautiful the countryside is in Germany or just simply 'That's nice'." Such acknowledgement of her homeland makes her appreciate Germany all the more. "I'm very happy that in Germany we have a waste disposal system that works and that everywhere is heated in winter and I don't have to be cold," she says.

All three are fully aware that they enjoy a great privilege because they come from Europe. "Many people think we behave very correctly. They don't try to make us conform to what is normal in Jordan," she says. Refugees in Germany can probably not say the same thing. They are expected to conform to local customs.

On the other hand, homesickness is something that everybody feels when they leave their homeland. Even if the three volunteers really enjoy their stay in Jordan at the TSS, they were still homesick at Christmas. "I usually feel I'd like to beam myself for a short time to Germany, especially when I miss special occasions (such as feasts, marriages, etc.) or I realise how uncertain I am in these strange surroundings," says Lisa Luka Kollert. Sometimes, they just wish they were in control of the situation and simply understand everything that's being said, for example. "But still, as volunteers, we have the privilege of returning to Germany in an emergency or as scheduled at the end of the ten months. That's something that many refugees in Germany certainly dream of..." she says.

But what will it be like when the three finally come home? "There's one question

on my mind: I've done my Abitur (German school leaving certificate) and I decided to go to Jordan for one year. But what will it be like when I go back to Germany?" asks Felix Thier. "My life will never be like it used to be. I will again choose a new path and leave home." On the one hand, he is looking forward to leading an independent life. But on the other hand, this raises many questions. "I'm worried about having to let go of my old life and in a way, of leaving home. What will my new life look like? What do I want to study? Where do I want to study? What is it that I want in the end?"

Katja Dorothea Buck


INFO

The three young adults went to Jordan as part of the Ecumenical Volunteers Programme of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS). If anybody is interested in spending a year at the TSS or at another institution of an EMS partner church, please find further information online at

<https://ems-online.org/weltweit-aktiv/oekumenisches-freiwilligenprogramm/>

WE LOOK FORWARD TO NEW MEMBERS!

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) supports and accompanies the work of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon and the Theodor Schneller School in Jordan. Its special task is to offer poor children school education and vocational training at the Schneller Schools. The EVS supplies information about churches and Christians in the Middle East in its publications and at its events.



The EVS publishes the Schneller Magazine four times a year and sends it to readers free of charge. Subscription to the magazine does not automatically bestow membership to the EVS Association. **Dear Reader, we would be delighted to welcome you as member of the EVS** and receive your support not only for the Schneller Schools but also the work of the editorial team.

If you want to become a member of the EVS, we will be glad to send you an application for membership. The annual minimum fee for individuals is Euro 25 and Euro 50 for companies and organisations. By making a donation to the Schneller Schools, you are supporting the work of a recognised charitable welfare and social organisation.

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MINA WÖRNER FROM WÜRTTEMBERG

A previously unknown co-worker at the Syrian Orphanage

Very little research has been made in the past about the work of European Christian women in the Orient although they often played an important role. This is true of Wilhelmine Wörner who worked as cook at the Syrian Orphanage from 1905 to 1909.

The presence of European women in Palestine was nothing unusual in the 19th century. Many women worked at the Syrian Orphanage right from its foundation in 1860. However, in many cases, their résumés have remained completely unknown. But there is sometimes a lucky coincidence when we find out something about one of these women, and this is what happened with Wilhelmine Wörner.

I was once at the Lorch Monastery attending the opening of the touring exhibition “In Würde leben Lernen – Das Syrische Waisenhaus und die Schneller-Schulen im Nahen Osten” (Learning in dignity – The Syrian Orphanage and the Schneller Schools in the Middle East). While I was there, an elderly gentleman came up and spoke to me. (For the past nine years, the exhibition organised by the Landeskirchliches Archiv (Regional Church Archive) has brought people’s attention to the history of the Schneller schools and their importance today by appearing at many locations in the Federal Republic.) The man told me that his great-aunt had worked at the Orphanage although he didn’t know what she did there. Luckily, he still had some of the things his great-aunt had bequeathed to him and he would like to donate them to



Photo: Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart

Wilhelmine Wörner in the traditional dress of Christian women from Bethlehem ...

the Archive. This is how the life of a previously unknown co-worker at the Syrian Orphanage of the Ottoman period came to light.

Wilhelmine Maria Wörner worked as kitchen manageress at the Orphanage for five years. She was born in Fichtenberg near Schwäbisch Hall on 22 March 1875, the seventh of nine children of carpenter Georg Michael Leonhard Wörner and his wife Karoline, née Mayer. She, like her younger sister Frieda Berta, never married. At the end of 1904, she heard from the local pastor Ernst Hahn that the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem was looking for a cook. She applied for the job immediately. In the minutes of a meeting that took place on 2 February 1905, the management board of the Orphanage adopted the resolution that “Mina Wörner from Württemberg” would fill this post for the following five years.

Wilhelmine Wörner started as kitchen manageress in Jerusalem on 1 May 1905. She headed a team of six to eight mainly local assistants. Every week, the institute's messenger, Salech Nachle (1890 to 1930), had to report to her on the food he had delivered to the Orphanage. This was necessary because the orders did not always tally with the goods actually delivered – many a request could not be fulfilled. The kitchen provided meals to all the co-workers and residents at the institute, the girls' school and the Armenian refugees who had lived there since 1896. Although the work was very strenuous – meals had to be cooked for over 150 people – she quickly settled down well to life at the Orphanage.

“Sister Mina” often accompanied pupils on outings and this gave her the chance to discover the land of the bible. These outings went to places such as the Tomb of Samuel in the Judaeen Desert near Jerusalem, the Dead Sea or to Bir Salem, the agricultural colony of the Orphanage on the Philistine Plain.

However, the Management Board decided to re-organise the structures at the institute. In future, the wife of a deacon, in this case the wife of Senior Brother Michael Stonis, was to assume the post of kitchen manageress. Wilhelmine Wörner was therefore not asked to stay any longer. She left Jerusalem on 7 October 1909 and returned to Fichtenberg. As a farewell present she received a photograph which some Armenian pupils had taken especially for her as a memento.

She stayed in Fichtenberg until her father died at the age of 82 in October 1914. After a short stay in Berlin where she was apparently not happy with the job which was offered to her, she returned to Württemberg. Together with her younger sister Frieda, she entered the services of the Gellhoff family in Stuttgart where she worked until the end of 1936 except for a short interruption. She finally returned to her parents' house in Fichtenberg at the age of 61 and spent her retirement there. Wilhelmine Wörner died at the age of 78 on 26 March 1953.



Photo: Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart

... and with co-workers at the Syrian Orphanage (3rd from right)

Dr Jakob Eisler is historian and works at the Archiv der Württembergischen Landeskirche. He is well-known as an international expert in the history of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem.

“THE EMS – AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION”

Delegates from all over the world meet at the EMS General Meeting

At the General Assembly of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse at the beginning of December, 51 delegates from EMS member churches elected a new Presidium, a new Mission Council and a new Finance Committee.

The EMS is no longer a German organisation but an international one!” stressed the outgoing Chair of the EMS Presidium, Marianne Wagner, Senior Church Council member of the Protestant Church in the Palatinate. The EMS Synod, the former decision-making body of the EMS, was never as colourful and diverse as the present General Assembly. Six years ago, the “Evangelical Mission Society in South-West Germany” changed its constitution to an international fellowship under the name of “Evangelical Mission in Solidarity”. The Synods up to then had always been a German-Swiss event, said Wagner. “Delegates from international churches sat as listeners in the galleries and had no voting rights.”

Things are different now. Since 2012, all delegates from the 23 churches and five mission societies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe, including the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), legally have equal rights and all have active and passive voting rights. The 17 members of the Mission Council meet every six months and ensure the implementation of the basic resolutions adopted by the General Assembly that convenes every two years.

In 2018, the first 6-year election period

ended – in Wagner’s words, it was just the right time to take stock of the situation and possibly adopt a new direction. She said that the most important tasks for the future were to achieve close communication between the bodies and the Secretariat in Stuttgart and to secure sustainable financial resources.

Handling diversity with respect

In her sermon during the opening service, Wagner also touched upon the diversity and the different cultures within the EMS Fellowship. “Sometimes, we regard ourselves as competitors. But Jesus Christ called upon his followers “that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe (John 17:21 NRSV).” Wagner continued: “If we look upon each other with the eyes of love, it is easier for us to handle theological differences. We can resolve conflicts by praying with one another and accepting one another. Handling diversity with respect, especially during conflicts, is an important Christian contribution to peace in our societies.”

The General Meeting thanked Reverend Jürgen Reichel for his services as General Secretary and for his committed work towards the internationalisation of the EMS. At the last meeting of the Mission Council in June last year, he announced he would not stand for re-election. Dr Kerstin Neumann from the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck (EKKW) has been Acting General Secretary since July 2018.

As scheduled, the General Meeting elected new members to sit on its bodies.

The EMS Presidium has two familiar members and a new member. Klaus Rieth, Church Council member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg, has already been a member of the EMS Presidium for the past six years and was elected Chair by a large majority. Dr Habib Badr, Senior Pastor of the National Evangelical Church in Beirut, who has also been member of the Presidium for the past six years, and Senior Church Council member Detlev Knoche, Director of the Centre of Ecumenical Work of the Protestant Church in Hessen and Nassau and the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck, who is new to this body, were elected as Rieth's deputies. The outgoing Chair, Senior Church Council member Marianne Wagner, Deputy Church President of the Protestant

Church in the Palatinate, did not stand for re-election.

The EVS is part of a large fellowship

The 3-member Presidium chairs the General Assembly and the Mission Council which meets every six months. The executive management of the Secretariat coordinates with the Presidium on important issues.

In addition, another 14 members were elected to the international Mission Council which heads the EMS. The Mission Council defines strategy and ensures the implementation of the basic resolutions adopted by the General Assembly that meets every two years. Of the 17 members of the Mission Council, eight come from churches in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, six from churches in Germany and three from mission societies belonging to the EMS, including the EVS which is represented by the Deputy Chair, Dr Reinhold Schaal. The next meeting of the Mission Council will take place in Lebanon in June this year.

Regina Karasch-Böttcher



Photo: Sebastian Reimold

EMS delegates and Secretariat staff at the General Meeting

A MARATHON THAT HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN

Rima Nasrallah is the third woman to be ordained in the Middle East

“A big step for a small church” was the headline in Schneller Magazine 2/2017 on the first ordination of a woman at the National Evangelical Synod in Syria and Lebanon (NESSL). The article ended with the question: “It remains to be seen the extent to which the decision at NESSL will affect other Evangelical churches in the Middle East.” Now the National Evangelical Church of Beirut (NECB) has also ordained a woman.

The ordination of Rima Nasrallah took place on 11 November 2018 at the same time as the Beirut marathon. The whole inner city was blocked off for the 50,000 participants. The streets were full of families; enthusiastic students manned the stations and afterwards cleared up the rubbish; young women also ran in veils or in close-fitting sportswear. It was a plethora of different generations, nations and genders – for a brief moment there was a glimpse of the rainbow flag of an LGBT group. All along the route the mood was one of festivity: a surprising warm-up to the ordination ceremony in the afternoon.

The venue: the Near East School of Theology (NEST) where Rima Nasrallah lectures in practical theology. Students come down the steps and rush to the waiting bus; lecturers take the time for a short greeting. All of them disappear in the bus earmarked for the “choir” which still wants to rehearse. I wait with Dorothee Beck who has travelled from Berlin just to be here. She is a friend of Rima Nasrallah. The in-laws of the future pastor have come

from the Netherlands as well as acquaintances from the Pacific region. I was sent by the EMS which exceptionally approved a 24-hour trip. We all walk on foot in the drizzling rain through the inner city to the church of the NECB.

In the service of her church for the past 20 years

The kick-off for these festivities went very quickly. The Supervisory Board of the NECB chaired by Reverend Habib Badr unanimously approved the ordination of Rima Nasrallah and fixed the date shortly afterwards. But for the doctor of theology, the “marathon” had started much earlier. At the age of 20, she had offered her services to her church and since then has been active in various functions.

Most of the people attending the service were surprised when they heard that Rima Nasrallah had completed an engineering degree before she started her studies in theology. In 2003, she received her Master of Divinity at the NEST. She then headed the Department for Religious Education and Spiritual Life at the NECB for five years. This was followed by several years preparing for her doctorate in liturgical ritual studies in the Netherlands. Rima Nasrallah is married to the Dutch theologian Wilbert van Saane. They have two children. In 2014, the family returned to Beirut where Rima Nasrallah worked as lecturer at the NEST.

Now, many years after she offered her services to her church, she has been ordained – an unusual step in a church context, not to mention in a religious con-

text which is the exclusive domain of male decision-makers.

The majority of greetings were pronounced by women

During the service, the candidate was asked an astonishing number of rigorous questions. Six ordained men gave their blessing. At the reception afterwards, greetings were mainly delivered by women. A particularly impressive moment was the passionate and clever speech by Najla Kassab who was the second woman to be ordained in the Middle East in 2017. Shortly after that, she was elected President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Change of scene: At the beginning of December 2018, hardly four weeks after her ordination in Beirut, Rima Nasrallah

delivers the report of the EMS Women's Pre-conference as new delegate of the international women's network to the plenary session of the EMS General Meeting in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse. She is wearing her white collar showing that she is an ordained pastor. I am surprised. Rima explains: If congregations in Lebanon see the photo of her appearance, it is important that they see her in her official function as an ordained pastor. The 11th of November 2018 was more than a magnificent church ceremony. The fact that women can also hold ecclesiastical offices must first sink into the minds and feelings of Arab Christians.

I ask myself whether it is the religious education lecturer speaking, knowing full well the enormous power of role models. Or is it Rima Nasrallah speaking as a far-sighted woman of the church who understands her calling not as a personal milestone but as a marathon which has just started; a marathon which many can join in to bear witness to a diversity of genders that is appropriately inspired by the Gospel.

Gabriele Mayer, PhD, is Head of the EMS Gender Desk and the Intercultural Education Unit.



Reverend Rima Nasrallah speaks the blessing upon the congregation for the first time as ordained pastor.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We are delighted to receive feedback from our readers. Praise as well as criticism allow us to continue our work with the Schneller Magazine. However, we reserve the right to edit your letters for space reasons.

Response to Schneller Magazine 3/2018

Thank you for the Schneller Magazine which I read with great attention. Your reports on the situation here in Syria speak straight from my heart. The German media, mainly television, remain particularly tight-lipped on this subject. My husband and I live in the south of the country. We arrived back from Germany on exactly the day when the IS committed the unimaginable and indescribable massacre of inhabitants in our district. Soueida was plunged for days into a state of shock. About 300 people lost their lives, slaughtered in bestial fashion. This was another incident that was hardly mentioned in the media.

Gabriele Hamzé, Soueida (Syrien)

Thank you for the many detailed reports on the situation in Syria! However, what Dr Nothnagle writes left me somewhat surprised. She describes the situation during her last visit to Damascus in 2010. She portrays the feeling of optimism that existed in Damascus at that time and there were many people who were curious of visitors from the West.

She goes on to describe the situation she experienced there now with impoverished people battling for survival because of the war and the very difficult present situation of Christians in the country. And

that her attempts to communicate her opinion to her Syrian partners were regarded as Western interference.

What I miss in the report is an explanation for this change in Syria. In 2010, President Bashar al-Assad, who had just started in office, announced he would introduce reforms and conduct talks with the opposition in the country. This is what led to the feeling of optimism which Mrs Nothnagle experienced during her trip in 2010.

Bashar al-Assad is still President. So, what happened? Who bears the responsibility for the ensuing war although the overwhelming majority of the Syrian population was fully satisfied with the situation in the country at the start of the war? Meanwhile, we know that many states interfered from outside and supplied weapons and even mercenaries. Before Russia intervened in the war, 14 states had, believe it or not, bombed Syria.

Dr Nothnagle is surprised that the people she talked to hoped that government troops would soon return the country to peace and "that the 'rebels' would surrender sooner or later". Why is she surprised by this longing for peace? It is well known that most Syrian Christians hope the country will not become a caliphate and that they would be able to have quite a good life under Bashar al-Assad. And why does Mrs Nothnagle place the term rebels in inverted commas? For the most part, they are actually Islamic rebels who would probably be labelled as "a threatening factor" here in Germany. It is a disgrace that they are very often protected by the USA, Israel and other Western states!

Monika Auener, Berlin

Response to Schneller Magazine 4/2018

I was advised to read the new issue of the Schneller Magazine by the former Director of the Schneller School in Amman, Rev. Dr Hartmut Brenner and by Prof. Sundermeier. I am in a similar situation as Rev. Hanna Josua except that I deal with converts from Iran. However, their situation is not quite the same as Arab Christians in Württemberg.

1. Most Persians come from underground or house churches and already have a good knowledge of the Bible. They are passionate converts, love Jesus and want to be baptised as quickly as possible because this is strictly forbidden in Iran and there are usually terrible consequences for the convert and the baptiser.
2. Iranians come to our parish congregation in the old town centre of Heidelberg full of interest and attend our weekly bible sessions in Persian. It is a great experience for them when they encounter an open cheerful worship service for the first time, where men sit next to women to the sound of piano and organ, where a congregation sings out loud and drinks coffee afterwards. The Iranians are over-whelmed by this experience. They come, wait and are astonished. Sometimes, we have 30 or 40 Iranians at a service – often, only the reading or the text of the sermon is in Farsi. The sermon is not translated. I am always astonished at this extremely respectful attitude – an inner participation without any rational evaluation which is always expected of us: questions/doubts/contradiction.
3. The Iranians are almost all asylum applicants and are frequently relocated

after 3 or 4 weeks after the deciding interview (often lasting 3 to 5 hours!). We hardly know each other, we start talking to one another and then we are torn apart. In most cases, they first go to a large camp in Mannheim. At least there is a spiritual contact point for them in Mannheim, the Paul Gerhard parish in Neckarstadt. Rev. Schubert often conducts additional services there with an interpreter. But then after a second friendship with a church, the next relocation looms again. This is why many of them urgently seek to be baptised. As a result, Rev. Schubert has baptised many Persians over the past few years. But then he loses them after a few months. Only a minority is politically recognised and try to remain in the Mannheim area. Almost all those who are refused recognition appeal against the decision and must wait for ages for their hearings and are then relocated. Groups that have just come together are again torn apart and sent to Donauschingen, Bruchsal, Sigmaringen, Ellwangen etc. – pure diaspora.

4. A minimum attendance period in a parish of one year as Rev. Josua rightly demands is hardly possible given these relocations and general uncertainty. Our parishes in particular also have great difficulty in finding co-workers to take on the responsibility of looking after these people. Even retired pastors seem to be reluctant to do this. Some want to finally enjoy their freedom and not bind themselves to a responsibility. Others are reluctant as they claim not to have the background knowledge or are unsure of their language abilities since they do not know English well enough.

The situation of most Persian asylum seekers is deteriorating as the months go by. People whom I meet shortly after their arrival are healthy and optimistic but they fall ill – in the worst case, they require psychiatric treatment. Many of them also suffer from a kind of persecution here if they profess to be Christians and have to live together with Muslims in the same camp. They are then isolated and exposed to contempt. This is something that a native German does not understand.

We not only need a reform of the camp and asylum system. We also need a Persian minister. I know of at least two who would be prepared to take on this service. One is a psychologist and worked as counsellor and psychotherapist in Iran. But our regional church makes no direct efforts to provide any help here. It has created many posts for the Department of Migration at the Superior Church Council in Karlsruhe – to deal with the bureaucracy – but what about people in the field? People who are prepared to eat and talk to those who want to convert? That is what is needed. And it is my worry that there are far too few of them.

*Pfr. i.R. Helmut Staudt,
Gaiberg near Heidelberg*

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For we know only in part,
and we prophesy only in part;

1 Corinthians 13:9



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