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SEARCHING AND FINDING GOD

BETWEEN CONVERSION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools

BETWEEN CONVERSION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Dear Reader,

When God takes the liberty to become man as happened in the manger in Bethlehem at Christmas, who should deny someone the freedom to convert to another person's religion if he or she believes that it opens the way to God? But the only thing is, what really happens when people convert from Judaism, Christianity or Islam to other religions? Does it work and if so, how? What are the social and legal consequences involved in taking such a step?

We live in a world where people are mobile as never before; a world which is marked by the movements of refugees and migrants – and also a world in which people are increasingly addressing the urgent question of their own identity. In many cases, they even regard it as an affront if anybody in their personal entourage redefines his or her religious identity. Admittedly, when the issue of conversion arises, it is not always an issue of “comparative parity” between religions. I well remember our neighbourhood in Jerusalem when young men in white kaftans distributed their little leaflets right up to our church door. They wanted us to believe that Islam was “the solution” and all other religions were completely wrong. I also remember young people from my own parish who, full of enthusiasm, dropped their new testaments in Orthodox Jewish letter boxes. And also, my Jewish acquaintances who asked me utterly aghast, “We don't want to entice any of you Christians or Muslims away from your religion. Why can't you leave us in peace with your missionary witness?”

In this issue, we give people a chance to speak about what it is like when someone takes the path which we generally call “conversion”. At the same time, we again report about the Schneller schools. We want to share with you everything new that has happened over the past few months, for example in Jordan.

But above all, let us not forget that God Himself become man in the manger in Bethlehem so that we humans can become fellow humans. So, with this in mind, may I wish you a merry and blessed Christmas.

Yours



Uwe Gräbe



EXPERIENCING A TRANSFORMED REALITY

From the perspective of mission, I am reminded of a transformation story in the New Testament. It is the story of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) – a story full of tensions. Jesus answers the plea of the nameless woman to cast the demon out of her daughter by telling her that one should not throw the bread for the children to the dogs. He shows himself to be quite discriminating on this occasion. But Jesus also learns from this. He learns how to get rid of his own prejudices and overcome his own limits.

The hinterland of Galilee where the story unfolds is Jesus' homeland. This is where he grew up. He knows the land and its people. He knows what brings them joy and what brings them sorrow. And one of the things that worries them is Tyre, the seaport which is so important for trade between Rome and Galilee. Although Rome is the dominant empire, Tyre represents the structures of exploitation. Wheat from the granaries of Galilee is bought up by the rich city of Tyre and sent to Rome. The consequences are fatal: the rural people of Galilee are starving. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This statement by Jesus has a significant social and political impact. With it he demonstrates his solidarity with his sisters and brothers in Galilee against the exploitative citizens of Tyre where the woman comes from.

The nameless Syrophenician woman apparently belongs to the upper class. Her daughter lies on a bed and not on a mat. In parrying the request, the listeners at the time understand that God is not one with

the rich men and women of Tyre but with the disadvantaged, the marginalised and the people in Galilee living on the fringes of society.

But although the woman belongs to the rich, is she not also poorly off? Her daughter is ill. Not only that. The child is possessed by a demon. She has an illness that has a ritual origin and makes her unclean. On top of all that, the mother cannot afford to send anyone else to Jesus — e.g. a servant as we hear elsewhere in the Gospel. She goes to him personally. While she is absent, is her daughter all alone at home? Is the woman perhaps a single mother as well? When she finally gets home, nobody comes to meet her to tell her about her daughter's recovery.

This poor woman is even rebuked by a man: not you! You don't deserve my healing! The rich Syrophenician woman is marginalised in many different ways – ritually, probably also economically and finally in her meeting with Jesus. Although he is one of the starving Galilean people, he has power over her as a man and he exerts this power by refusing to heal her. Instead of the help she begged for, all the woman heard was the insult "You dog!"

At this point, something happened which in present-day mission theology is called "mission from the margins". The woman knows what she needs best, not only regarding the help she requested from Jesus but also in the instant that Jesus insults her. She accepts the words of Jesus ("Yes, Sir,") and transforms it into an argument for her request ("...even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.") She makes herself small, as



“Jesus and the Woman of Canaan” – painting by Michael Angelo Immenraet (1621-1683), Union Church in Idstein.

small as Jesus wants her to be – she allows herself to be pushed away, almost under the table – but this reverses the situation into a victory for her request. That’s amazing! She doesn’t go away (something I would have done). She doesn’t slap Jesus in the face (which I might perhaps have been tempted to do). Instead, she swallows her humiliation (which I would have been unable to do) and changes course. In so doing, she puts into question the power structure between Jesus and herself, between the Galileans and the Syrophenicians, between those included in the group worthy of healing and those who are excluded from this group. In fact, she demands that Jesus not only shows his solidarity with the Galileans but with all humanity who need his acts of healing.

Just look what became of Jesus’ mission: a woman challenges it and spreads

it into the whole world beyond the circle it was originally intended for. Mission as the witness of the God of life aims at transformation. When people experience a transformed reality, the ground is prepared for conversion. In this story, it is Jesus who is converted: into a person who brings healing and salvation to the whole world.

Reverend Ravinder Salooja is Director of the Leipzig Mission Society.

A TEST CASE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

On the universal right of being allowed to convert

The right to change religion is not only a central precept of religious freedom, it also assumes the quality of a “test case”. It offers proof of the essence of the human right of religious freedom.

From a legal viewpoint, the matter is in fact very clear. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 expressly quotes the term “change” despite a lot of political resistance. Accordingly, everyone has the freedom to leave a religious community and adhere to a different religion or also to turn away from any religion. Subsequent modifications to religious freedom in international law may have changed the wording. However, the fact that the freedom to convert is part of this precept is still clearly retained. For example, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that everyone shall have the right to have or adopt a religion or belief of his or her choice. Therefore, this covers the issue of conversion.

As you know, this guarantee is a far call from reality in many parts of the world. In some countries – such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Mauritania etc. – renouncing the state religion carries with its criminal penalties which may even go as far as the death penalty in these countries. In other countries – such as in India, Greece, Russia etc. – the act of conversion may be exempt from penalty; but those who instigate a convert to change his or her faith may face penalties under certain circumstances. Indirectly, this also affects the convert himself who is then marked by the stigma

of recklessness, vulnerability to inveiglement and disloyalty. In addition, anti-blasphe-my laws which carry punishments exist in many states across all cultural regions and they often serve to deter potential converts.

Besides the threat of criminal penalties, there are also possible penalties relating to family law, such as the withdrawal of custody of the person’s own children or exclusion from inheritance as a consequence of “apostasy” from the state-protected religion. This is often accompanied by mobbing in schools, companies, the neighbourhood or even within the person’s own family. The threatening situation facing many women and men converts, many of whom keep their beliefs secret, calls for systematic attention to be paid to the right of a change in religion.

Admittedly, the issue of conversion raises other practical political problems. It is also a matter of fundamentals. In international debate, there are repeated attempts to push this key part of religious freedom to the sidelines. For example, this takes place by transforming religious freedom into a type of “protection of honour” for a state-recognised religion. Over the years, many draft resolutions have been received mainly from Islamic states; however, Russia has recently also become active in this direction. The root of the problem here is that the reputation of a religion should be regarded as an assumed protected object instead of the right of freedom of the individual. In the end, this means nothing less than removing the component of inherent freedom from reli-

gious freedom. The result is an absurdity of fraudulent labelling. Of all things, it would lead to a strengthening of religious or religious-political structures in the name of a misunderstood, even totally twisted ideology of religious freedom, and this would immunise these structures against any criticism or change. This has nothing to do with a human rights approach any more.

To counter erosion trends of this kind which are sadly appearing more and more frequently in United Nations human rights bodies, changing religion is even taking on the character of an important test case. Without the possibility of conversion, religious freedom can simply not exist as a fundamental human right – neither in practice nor in theory. By the way, the freedom to change religion is also a manifestation of the personal right of free choice to remain in a religious community. Therefore, the freedom to convert is not only essential for (potential) converts. It also demonstrates the overall claim to freedom in the human right of religious freedom.

Prof. Dr Dr hc Heiner Bielefeldt holds the Chair of Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at the Institute for Political Science at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. From June 2010 to October 2016, he was Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. Bielefeldt held the keynote speech at the EVS General Meeting in 2017.



Photo: BpB

Religious freedom as painted by illustrator Stefan Eling for the children's page of the Federal Agency for Civic Education www.hanisauland.de.

“KNOWING WHAT YOU’RE LETTING YOURSELF IN FOR”

Bishop July about the challenges when baptising Muslims

When Muslims were baptised two years ago during the Easter service at the Stuttgart Stiftskirche (Collegiate Church), police protection was needed. We can’t baptise in secret, says the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg, Frank Otfried July. What is important, however, is that everything takes place with respect for the other.

Media interest was enormous when you baptised the Muslims at the Stiftskirche in Stuttgart in March 2016. Was it the first time you baptised a Muslim?

Yes. It was an Easter service when baptism traditionally takes place. It is somewhat unfortunate that the baptism aroused so much attention at the time. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg regards itself as a church in which we bear witness to our faith in deeds, for example in diaconical work or refugee work. We do this with respect for the other. And we bear witness to our faith in the words of Jesus Christ, with an open invitation, our readiness to dialogue, with missionary zeal but also with sensitivity towards witnessing the faith of others.

Did you consider beforehand that, in the worst case, apostasy from Islam is punishable by death?

Of course, this question played an important role. It is one of the reasons why I was unhappy about the large media interest. We even had to request a police presence. A Muslim acquaintance of mine told me that religious freedom was also an impor-

tant issue with him and that he did not appreciate that we baptised so publicly. On the other hand, we cannot baptise in secret – it is a public declaration of our belief in Jesus Christ. Of course, we will continue to review what is reasonable in each case. What is important is to make clear to Muslims who request baptism exactly what they are letting themselves in for. On the other hand, two years ago, I attended the baptism of two large families from Iran at Torgau in Saxony. I was sitting next to one woman. She told me that a few weeks before, she had still worn a chador but while she was still in Iran, she had spent a long time looking intensively into the Christian faith. For her, baptism was an act of liberation. That touched me very much.

How does the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg resolve the conflict that baptism for Muslims carries with it such a harsh punishment in Islam?

We have no way of influencing the laws there. In the main, I see our responsibility linked to refugee policy. For example, if a baptised Muslim is deported and he is faced with the threat of persecution in his homeland, then we must stand up for him. I appeal to all pastors who baptise Muslims to have a serious talk with them about this problem and to carefully review their motives and circumstances.

How many Muslims have already been baptised in Wuerttemberg?

Basically, the baptism of Muslims is not a common phenomenon. We have no special records about this so I cannot quote



Photo: EMH/Gotfried Stoppel

The Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg, Frank Otfried July, appeals to all those who baptise Muslims to very carefully review their motivation and circumstances.

any reliable numbers.

Who prepares them for baptism?

I once attended a baptism class at the Stiftskirche in Stuttgart. 16 to 18 people were sitting with the pastor of the Stiftskirche and the pastor of the Arab Evangelical Church. There were also some Arab Christians there. Their presence is important because they know the world, language and culture in which their fellow Arabs live. As trained laypeople, they also take on some of the units during baptism classes.

What happens after baptism? Are newly baptised people normally integrated in their local congregations?

Some of them love to go to their local congregations. But most of them go to the Arab parish because that's where they find a familiar cultural environment and they can talk to others who have recently been baptised.

How does the fact that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg baptises Muslims influence dialogue with the Muslim community?

At present, both sides avoid the topic. Of course, Muslims know that we baptise former Muslims at their request, but they also know that the Wuerttemberg Church respects the Muslim community and maintains an open dialogue. Instead, we speak about other topics such as what constitutes good upbringing or a good relationship. The important thing is the trust that grows between us. Especially in times like these, we must use every opportunity to promote peaceful relationships. That doesn't mean we should ignore our differences and problems. We duly owe it to our sisters and brothers in the Middle East who are much greater experts in coexisting with Muslims than we have.

Katja Dorothea Buck conducted the interview.



Bishop July at the Schneller School in Lebanon

At the end of September, the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg, Frank Otfried July, visited the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon. What impressed him most were the many Muslim pupils who simply attended evening prayers as a matter of course. “That’s how they find out how Christians believe and why they run a school like the Schneller school,” says July who was surprised by the immense commitment shown by the people working there. “Everybody I talked to was convinced that their work at the school is more to them than just a job.”



LEAVING THE FAITH

Apparently, pop singer Zayn Malik did not reckon with the reactions of some of his Muslim fans. In an interview with the British magazine “Vogue”, the 25-year-old said he no longer kept to the rules of Islam and no longer regarded himself as a Muslim. The England-born son of a Pakistani father and a British mother explained that he was still spiritual in his beliefs but he no longer practised the faith. “I no longer believe that you can only eat certain meat which has to be blessed by prayer in a certain way (before being slaughtered) and that you have to recite a prayer in a certain language five times a day. I don’t believe in these things anymore,” quotes Vogue. Instead, he let himself be simply guided by his con-

science. “I believe that, if you are a good person, everything will turn out for the good.”

Many of his Muslim fans had a different opinion. His words triggered a wave of indignation on Instagram and Twitter. Many were disappointed, some viciously insulted him or declared they were now turning away from him.

Even Malik’s mother had to bear the brunt of angry fans commenting on her photos on Instagram. Many couldn’t believe how she could let her son turn away from his religion. Others hope he will find a way back to his faith.

(n-tv.de)

BY NO MEANS A CHEAP GRACE

Church handout on baptising Muslims

In 2014, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Union of Protestant Free Churches (VEF) published a handout on baptising non-Christians. The occasion was the reproach by government authorities that through baptism, pastors were providing asylum seekers with advantages in the asylum procedure.

Germany is a secular state. In actual fact, it should not matter in an asylum procedure whether a person is baptised or not. But when a refugee flees from a country where Christians suffer discrimination or persecution and then chooses to be baptised in Germany, the authorities start to question whether the asylum seeker was baptised out of genuine conviction or whether it was to gain a better chance in the asylum procedure.

In the same way, pastors are instructed by the church to baptise people who want to become Christians, irrespective of who they are. But what should they do if someone urgently requests to be baptised because their asylum application is soon to be reviewed? The authorities regard this as a “misuse” of baptism. When is baptism misused and when is it not? In the church’s opinion, this should not be decided by the authorities. Ultimately, baptism is a documented right of self-determination of the church. However, pastors should not be overly lax with the sacraments. This is the background to a handout that appeared four years ago with the unwieldy title of “How to deal with requests for baptism from asylum seekers”.

In it, the EKD and the VEF demand that those seeking to be baptised should first receive explanations to the most important questions of the Christian faith – if necessary, with the help of a competent interpreter. The persons who administer baptism should be aware of the questions that may arise in an asylum procedure as a result of baptism and what other possibilities there are apart from baptism to help asylum seekers. The attached list of contact addresses in each of the regional and free churches is correspondingly long.

The handout does not explicitly state that the majority of asylum seekers requesting baptism are Muslims. However, some examples from Iran and Afghanistan show that the authors had Muslims specifically in mind. They take on an extremely high risk when they have themselves baptised. In many countries, Muslim converts can face imprisonment or other means of state persecution, not to mention the problems which the family sees in the baptism of a family member.

Katja Dorothea Buck

The handout in German can be downloaded at <https://archiv.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/90777.html>.



WHEN MUSLIMS ARE BAPTISED

Experiences made by the Arab Evangelical Church in Stuttgart

The organisers of baptism courses in Stuttgart propose that a standard ruling by regional and free churches on the issue of baptism practice would increase trust from the authorities. It would also protect converted asylum applicants from the general suspicion that they intend to gain an unfair advantage.

Among the many Muslim refugees who have come to Germany in the past few years, there are some who have been baptised. Do they do this to ensure they are not deported or because they really have found their path in Christianity? “We can hardly imagine how enormous it is for each individual to step away from Islam and accept Christianity,” says Heidi Josua who teaches baptism classes at the Arab Evangelical Church in Stuttgart. Quite apart from the fact that the fabric of an entire life simply collapses, apostasy in Islam means the betrayal of one’s religious community, one’s homeland and one’s family. “Baptism is a turning point in life and publicising it often brings with it disadvantages or insults and sometimes even reprisals from fellow countrymen or one’s own family,” she says. It is therefore all the more important to accompany the baptised person so that they can grow in the faith.

The Arab Evangelical Church in Stuttgart offers baptism classes twice a year in Arabic for interested Muslims. Every class has between 15 and 25 participants. They are people from an Arab Evangelical congregation but also include people who were already baptised in a regional or free

church parish and want to hear all the important faith issues again in their own mother tongue. The baptism courses are not results-oriented. At the end of the baptism course, the trainer, Reverend Hanna Josua, holds a conversation with the applicant during which either side can decide whether the baptism should take place or should be postponed to another date. According to the doctor of theology, the ideal situation is if the parish or a family in the parish assumes the role of godparents for the baptismal applicant. “Our aim is not to get people to join the Arab Evangelical Church in Stuttgart but to integrate them locally.”

The Josuas are experts on the topic of baptising Muslims. Both of them speak fluent Arabic and know the Muslim lifestyle well. Hanna Josua comes from Lebanon and his wife Heidi graduated in Islamic studies. They recommend a middle path when it comes to assessing the sincerity of a baptism request. On the one hand, it cannot be generally assumed that refugee Muslims intend to use baptism fraudulently to obtain the right to obtain residence, as immigration authorities and courts would like to presume. On the other hand, it is legitimate for ministers to critically question the motivation of requests for baptism. “In most cases, the national churches handle baptismal practice with responsibility,” says Hanna Josua. However, he believes it would be helpful if the individual regional churches could agree on a standard baptismal practice which should include careful preparation and should also define recommendations and guidelines. Hanna Josua is

certain that this would increase the trust of courts in a conversion.

This is in fact the point where an update of the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) handout would be desirable (see page 9). "For example, besides mandatory baptism courses and attending a preparatory seminar in one's own language, one could also introduce the precondition that people seeking baptism should actively attend services and other parish events for at least a whole year," suggests the pastor. What should be recognisable is the will to change a way of life, to assimilate theological knowledge and practice a Christian way of life. During pastoral counselling, the baptismal candidate should be asked about his or her motivation and the consequences of conversion should be explained, even in case of possible deportation. "A mother-tongue priest or an experienced Christian must

also be present during this conversation," advises Josua. And if family circumstances are disordered or there is a question of past criminal offences, the baptism should be postponed until these points are clarified.

Hanna and Heidi Josua find the baptism courses highly enriching. "The questions which people ask us do not come up in any of the conventional written baptism courses," says Heidi Josua. It has also proven very worthwhile to invite converts baptised in previous years to attend the courses. "They are still fresh from completing the long and strenuous path which many have to endure when they decide to be baptised." At the same time, they must also face the personal challenge of formulating their faith. It's a real win-win situation, says the religious education teacher.

Katja Dorothea Buck



Baptism means a turning point in the life of those who convert from Islam to Christianity.

A PITFALL FOR DIALOGUE

Personal considerations on the topic of conversion and dialogue

The topic of conversion is a difficult one. It is a personal decision which may also become a challenge for a person's entourage. So far, no studies have been made on how the issue of the baptism of Muslims can be broached in dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Germany.

When the issue of conversion crops up, I have to think of two Muslim friends. One comes from Algeria and is what one can call a pious Muslim. When we were students in Paris, we talked a lot about religion and we touched on all sorts of topics. He looked for arguments for the validity of his faith and I did the same for mine. Luckily, this did not hurt our friendship.

The other is a female friend from my time studying in Tübingen. Like myself, she came from an Evangelical parental home but converted when she was 16 years old. When I met her, she had long been wearing a headscarf. I also had long conversations with her. I wanted to understand why she had left the religion in which we had both been born into and adopt another religion. She was even prepared to accept that parts of the German population would look at her with disdain. At that time, I was unable to really understand.

The topic of baptising Muslims has come to the public's attention since many people from Muslim countries have found refuge in Germany. As a journalist and religious scientist, I have long been very

interested in the topic of conversion. But until recently, I was only able to work with the one aspect – when Christians became Muslims. Of course, I also knew that there were Muslims who had been baptised into Christianity. My research always came to a dead end since converts did not want to make their conversion public. Even the pastors who had baptised them did not want to talk about it. If the convert comes from a church in the Middle East, the reason given had to do with fear for his or her own survival, or for the church itself or for the Christian minority in general. Pastors living in the secularised society in Germany explained their silence by the fact that they did not want to endanger dialogue with the local Muslim community.

A what-if mind game

Two years ago, I happened by chance to meet the President of the Evangelical Church in Algeria at a conference in Beirut. He was himself a convert and he spoke enthusiastically about the many people in his country who had found their way to Christ. He talked about lively congregations which were not intimidated by government threats of reprisals and continued to celebrate their services. He invited me to come to Algeria and see for myself. An enticing invitation.

So far, I had not gone on this trip for practical reasons. But I also hesitated for totally different reasons. If I ever went to Algeria, I would have to call my friend from my student days. And of course, I would have to tell him why I had come.

Anything else would be dishonest and cowardly. How would he react when I told him about his countrymen who had turned away from the faith that is so holy to him to assume my faith that is so holy to me? Would our friendship survive? Or would I then lose a close friend from bygone days?

One thing became clear to me with this what-if mind game. The topic of baptising Muslims can become a pitfall for dialogue. In times when globalisation shakes the foundations of society, dialogue becomes a duty and no longer a choice.

But how can we in this country speak to Muslim communities about the fact that Muslims come to our churches to be baptised? It would be a cowardly thing to avoid the issue. And cowardice is not a good counsellor when it is a matter of building trusting and long-lasting relationships. It is certainly not wrong to refer to the universal right to religious freedom. But from a human point of view, it is much too little. When a person converts, he or she turns his or her back on the original religion and the religious community from where he or she stems. For those who are left behind and who have long found the truth for their lives in their own faith, this triggers at the least a feeling of irritation and perhaps also sadness or anger. I well remember how confused I felt with the decision of my student friend to convert to Islam!

Tolerating the other's uncertainty

It is up to us to realise and tolerate the uncertainty of those whose religion is rejected by a person from their own midst. It is also up to us to bear in mind the relationship between majority and minority

in which a conversion takes place. If Muslims are baptised in Germany, they decide in favour of the majority religion and basically abandon the minority to their own devices. In the Middle East, the opposite is true. There, a person wanting to convert makes a decision in favour of a minority.

But no matter where Muslims decide to be baptised, we Christians should not regard their baptism as proof that the Christian faith is better than Islam. Just as little as the conversion of Christians to Islam says anything about the greater truth of Islam. Conversion is always and ultimately the personal decision of an individual.

It helps me to think that the various religions are all gifts of God to humanity which He, as well known, created in all its great diversity. God gives us the opportunity of finding Him through the religions. Usually, a person is born into a faith. But if a person finds that he or she can find God better on a different path, it is his or her personal decision which must be respected. It has nothing to say about the overall value of the religion in question.

Katja Dorothea Buck

IN SEARCH OF A DIFFERENT TRUTH

How people in Egypt and Tunisia deal with conversion

The topic of conversion becomes all the more sensitive the more religious a society is. This is demonstrated by comparing more secular Tunisia with deeply pious Egypt.

Last summer, we conducted a long interview with a former Muslim woman from Tunisia at our Center for Arab-West Understanding (CAWU) in Egypt. She was baptised at a church in Tunis in 2014. What attracted her was the concept of God's love for humanity as found in Christianity. In 2016, she came to Egypt after seeing impressive videos of Christian prayer meeting at Mokattam Mountain, a range of hills near Cairo.

Her father must have been very authoritarian. He forced her into traditions that have very little to do with Islamic faith. She was drummed into an unhappy marriage. She found nothing in her marriage that made Islam attractive in her eyes. She almost died giving birth to one of her children. The doctors had already given up hope on her until a Christian doctor started praying for her in the name of Jesus.

She knew nothing of the Christian faith but then she started finding out about it. She got to know a local congregation and Christian priests who in the end baptised her. She took her children and fled Tunisia to go to Turkey where she started helping Yezidi, Christian and Kurdish women who were themselves fleeing from regions held by the Islamic State. The Turkish police arrested her and deported her back to Tunisia.

In the years after her baptism, she met many other converts. Over time, it became clear to her that many were mainly interested in material support. She also found out that many Muslims and Christians adhered more to traditions than to faith. During her search for meaning, she came into contact with agnostic theologians. Today, she says of herself that she is a humanist¹.

This story is similar to many stories about conversion. They go through experiences of life that disenchant the religion they were born into. Then they start searching for the truth. There may be moments of enlightenment which they find in another religion. The behaviour of believers and scientific criticism of biblical and Quran texts then lead to the view that these books are human works and are not free from errors.

Besides the search for meaning, there are many others in Islam and Christianity who convert for many other reasons; to flee from domestic violence, love, marriage into a higher social class, the hope of emigration and economic advantages. The reasons for conversion have rarely anything to do with the conviction of finding truth in another religion. I do not maintain that this does not happen but the majority of converts I have met and interviewed have so many other different reasons of this kind.

¹ Dickson, Comfort and Hulsman, Cornelis, "A Tunisian Muslim Woman's Life History: Turning into a Humanitarian who Believes that God is Love and Became a Defender of (Christian) Minorities in Tunisia," Arab-West Report, September 9, 2018, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/tunisian-muslim-woman%E2%80%99s-life-history-turning-humanitarian-who-believes-god-love-and-became-defender>

In deeply religious countries – and most Muslim countries are so – conversion is a very sensitive issue. Most Muslims as well as Christians in the Middle East do not accept the conversion of a family member. She or he is ostracised by the family and this can be a highly traumatising experience for both sides. Sometimes, violence is used and, in a few cases, Muslims or Christians kill a convert in their own family. Muslims allegedly use violence more than Christians². But the deceased monk Matta al-Meskeen once said that if the situation in Egypt was the opposite where there were 90 per cent Christians and ten per cent Muslims living in the country, the Christians would behave in exactly the same way as the majority of Muslims today. This is because Muslims and Christians in the Muslim world live in a system of values where honour plays an enormous role. Every conversion is regarded as a disgrace for the family if a member gives up their religion. To protect their own honour, the other religious group is vilified. This may lead to violent conflicts and sometimes even end up in murder.

There are enormous differences between countries. Large parts of Tunisia are secularised so if a person converts, the government does not intervene. On the other hand, Egypt is a deeply religious country. From a legal aspect, apostasy from Islam is not possible and the state feels itself obliged to act if unrest breaks out as a result of a conversion. However, there is no witch hunt against converts in Egypt as in other countries.

² This has impacts on the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. See: H. Glimmerveen, "Ecumenism With Islam? (1) Look at Muslim Responses to People who want to Leave Islam or Christian Minorities," Arab-West Report, October 30, 2018, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/ecumenism-islam-1-look-muslim-responses-people-who-want-leave-islam-or-christian-minorities>



As a rule, people in Egypt are very religious and churches and mosques are always well attended. A normal weekday service in the Cave Church at the Mokattam hill in Cairo.

On the topic of religious freedom, we strive to take on a western view. But that is not regarded as fair or just in the Arab world. People in the Middle East are much more religious than in Europe. As a result, conversion is a very sensitive topic, more so than in secularised western countries. It is not extraordinary to find a Reverend Muhammed in secular Tunisia (he even

kept his name after baptism and works as pastor in a local parish). On the other hand, this would be suicidal in a deeply religious country such as Egypt.

When someone converts, it is advisable to regard it as a personal conviction and let the convert gradually grow into his or her new faith. As soon as such stories become public, people and groups start to exert pressure to bring the converted back into their religious community. As a rule, conversions need years of growth until everything takes root.

Cornelis Hulsman is a sociologist and comes from the Netherlands. He first went to Egypt in 1976. He started Arab West Report in 1997 and since then has been its chief editor. He has interviewed many Muslims who have converted to Christianity as well as Christians who have become Muslims.



The coexistence of Christians and Muslims in Egypt is a theme for painters. But conversion is taboo.

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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LOTS OF GOOD NEWS FROM AMMAN

News from the Theodor Schneller School

Kerstin Sommer, Chair of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), and Uwe Gräbe, EVS Executive Secretary, visited the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman at the beginning of November. There they were met with lots of good news.

Something they noticed immediately were the new investments in equipment in the classrooms. This raises the quality of the day school enormously. The 16,000 Euro provided by the *Schneller Foundation* to the TSS went towards the purchase of eight smartboards and the associated peripheral equipment. Schools in Germany can only dream of investments of this size. It is also wonderful to see how the pupils had made their learning environment more appealing, said Sommer at the EVS General Meeting (see p 22). The children had painted colourful



Students explain their drafts to redesign the TSS site to the School Administrative Board.

scenes at several places on the walls. The high standard of the equipment in the science laboratory was also impressive to see. The school also does a lot for children with special needs, reported Sommer. Currently, there are twelve children receiving special needs tuition to help them keep up with the other children in the main subjects of mathematics, English and Arabic.

A lot of progress is also reported in the vocational workshops at the TSS. In the past few years, the demand for professions such as car mechanics, carpentry or metalworking has gradually dropped off for various reasons. As a result, the school is now planning to offer additional vocations in the catering industry, hairdressing, cosmetics and mechatronics. The first two vocations are also interesting for girls. The vocational workshops at the school work closely with state authorities. All certificates which the young adults complete at the TSS are officially recognised.

Sommer also had more to report about



Uwe Gräbe receives a haircut from an apprentice hairdresser at the TSS.



Photo: EMS/Gräbe

Some pupils receive special needs lessons to help them keep up in the main subjects.

the major solar system project. Negotiations are currently underway with the company that installed the system to extend the maintenance contract as compensation for the delay in completion and also to offer training for young adults at the TSS. Sommer explained that continuous professional maintenance is all the more important in a country such as Jordan since sand and dust deposit very quickly on the solar panels in the desert region and this drastically reduces the amount of power that the system generates. "It would be a good thing if young adults from the TSS could be trained in solar systems." This would be a vocation with enormous future potential in a country like Jordan where the sun shines for most of the time.

After years of standstill, there is finally movement in what is known as the Mutah-kamileh project. Eight years ago, the bus company concluded a long-term lease for part of the TSS site and started to excavate large parts of the plot. However, shortly afterwards, the company went bankrupt and stopped payment of the lease rentals that were originally agreed upon. At last, the TSS has been able to receive partial

compensation and has received a reimbursement of 350,000 JD (= about 440,000 Euro).

Sommer and Gräbe also learnt about the extent of the dynamic progress and forward-looking approach meanwhile achieved at the TSS. Director Khaled Freij succeeded in interesting Jordanian architecture students to participate in a competition to produce concepts to make better use of the TSS site. A number of students presented the School Administrative Board with their draft designs which included landscaped parks, sports facilities and swimming pools. Even if there is no money to implement even one of these draft designs in the future, the competition shows how much potential there is at the TSS.

Katja Dorothea Buck

FIGURES

During the current 2018/2019 academic year, a total of 256 pupils of both genders attend classes at the Theodor Schneller School. 205 of them come from Jordan. 20 are Palestinians, 13 come from Iraq, 11 from Egypt, 5 from Bangladesh and 2 from Syria. At present, 63 boys and 17 girls live at the boarding home. The kindergarten is attended by a total of 24 children: 14 boys and 10 girls. 47 young adults are undergoing training at the TSS.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

News from the Johann Ludwig Schneller School

The Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) faces new challenges in the new academic year. But there are also new opportunities, such as a training programme for early school leavers.

The school had to invest heavily in building maintenance. The ground on which many of the buildings stand suffers from subsidence due to water pressure. The conspicuous settlement cracks in the foundation walls are a clear indication that action is urgently needed. Some parts of the workshops have already had to be closed off since their structural safety has become critical. Currently, drainage ditches have been excavated around the endangered buildings to reduce water pressure exerted on the foundations. The structure of the damaged buildings will be secured as soon as the situation is sufficiently stabilised. The school is urgently reliant on donations to complete this important maintenance work.



Photo: EVS/Sommer

As before, there continues to be a lot of interest in the sewing courses for refugee women from Syria.



Photo: EVS/Sommer

A worker excavating a draining ditch.

There are also changes to the vocational department this academic year. The school director, George Haddad, has introduced a programme for early school leavers. Whereas the number of applications for the classic vocations such as car mechanic, fitter, carpenter and electrician have lately been on the decline, this programme is well accepted by early school leavers to prepare them for normal training in a few months.

There is again good demand for the seamstress project for single mothers who have fled from Syria. And what is particularly encouraging, says EVS Chair Kerstin Sommer reporting at the General Meeting (see page 22), is the church organ which is played regularly at evening prayers. A year ago, the school shipped an unused organ from a church in Scotland to Lebanon with support from the *Schneller Foundation*.

Katja Dorothea Buck

WE APPEAL FOR YOUR DONATION

The children and adults at the Johann Ludwig School experienced a blessing in disguise when a boiler exploded in the cellar of one of the boarding homes in mid-October. It must have come about as a chain of unfortunate circumstances and misunderstandings. The heating system, which had been modernised to the latest state of the art over the past few years, was due for a service on the following day. Rolf Bartel, who had travelled from Waiblingen to Lebanon especially for this purpose, had therefore shut off the heating system together with the

local maintenance team and drained the water from the boilers. One of the educators wanted to send his boys to the showers in the evening so he turned the system back on, bypassing several safety circuits. The empty boiler exploded but luckily just at the time when all the children, young adults and educators were in church for evening prayers. The force of the explosion even shattered the glass in the windows on the third floor and doors were lifted out of their hinges. If anyone had been in the house at the time, the school would not only have material damage to report.



Photo: JLSS/Haeddad

Meanwhile, a new boiler has been installed and the damage in the cellar has been cleared up as far as possible. All the taps and switches are now secured so that no unauthorised persons can operate them. The director also locked the heating system rooms and only the maintenance team has access to them. It is not easy for the school to pay for such repairs from their current funds. Therefore, we appeal to you once again for your generous support.

FIGURES

In the 2018/2019 academic year, 169 children and young adults attend the Johann Ludwig Schneller School. 116 of them are boys and 53 are girls. 120 of them come from Lebanon, 46 from Syria, 2 girls come from Germany and 1 child from Egypt. The boarding home currently houses 107 child-

ren: 92 boys and 15 girls. 17 children attend the kindergarten. 95 young adults are undergoing vocational training at the JLSS. 40 want to become car mechanics, 29 carpenters, 14 fitters and 12 want to work later as electricians.

BRAHMS AND THE FRAGILE MIDDLE EAST

EVS meets in Ditzingen for its General Meeting

The 11th of November is regarded as the foundation day of the Syrian Orphanage. On this day in 2018, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) convened its General Meeting in Ditzingen.

As the Association has no premises of its own, the EVS is reliant on the hospitality of other parishes to hold its Annual General Meeting. This year, the Association found an excellent host in Ditzingen. The Middle East was the main topic at the service in the city church, not only for members who had travelled from far and wide but also for the local congregation. The EVS had an experienced preacher in the person of Reverend Traugott Plieninger. In the past few years, Plieninger had been several times to Lebanon and had also visited the Johann Ludwig Schneller School there. In his sermon based on Job 14:1-6, he continually weaved elements from Schneller history into his sermon and addressed the situation of brothers and sisters in faith in the Middle East.

After the service, the roughly 60 members and some interested parties from Ditzingen gathered in the adjacent community hall where EVS Chair Kerstin Sommer and EVS Executive Secretary Uwe Gräbe reported on their recent trip to the Schneller schools in Jordan and Lebanon (see page 18). Gräbe also reported on the preschool in the Valley of the Christians in Syria. The teachers who themselves had to flee from their homes were doing excellent work, providing the 70 children with hours of carefree fun and introducing

them to their first experiences with writing and calculating. The warm lunch served at the preschool every day was also very important for the children, some of whom come from very poor families. The project, which was started five years ago by the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS), will end in 2019. Many teachers want to return to their home towns where work is slowly starting on reconstruction. "No child will have to go without education because of this," said Gräbe with assurance. There were several public schools in Wadi Nasara which could accept all the children.

The copious lunch served by conscientious Ditzingen parishioners was followed by the formal part of the agenda for the General Meeting. Christian Kissling, the new EVS treasurer, presented the 2017 financial statement which had been verified by an independent auditor. According to Kissling, the EVS has so many private donors (4,574) and together with the 354 congregations, they made up the majority of donations. As a whole, income from donations was on the increase. The EVS Executive Secretary reported that the Association was growing by seven to eight members per year. "This is an achievement that many other associations engaged in a similar field can only dream about," said Sommer. The EVS has currently 289 members. The General Meeting approved the annual financial statement and finally discharged the Executive Board and the Executive Secretary unanimously.

The General Meeting also appointed a new Board of Trustees as scheduled for the

Schneller Foundation. The new members of the Board of Trustees are Oliver Schneller, son of the previous Chair of the Board of Trustees, Martin Schneller, Berthold Friess, Director of the State Parliament of Baden-Wuerttemberg, and Bishop Jochen Cornelius-Bundschuh, Bishop of Baden. They take over the seats of Martin Schneller, Alfons Riek from Festo AG & Co. KG and Eberhard Will who was appointed to the Board of Trustees by the EMS. The remaining members on the Board of Trustees are Herta Däubler-Gmelin, former Federal Minister of Justice, Steffen Bilger, member of the Bundestag and Parliamentary State Secretary in the Ministry of Transport, and Volker Jung, Church President of the Evangelical Churches in Hesse and Nassau. The EVS Executive Board appointed Musa Al-Munaizel and Bernd Apel from its members to the Board of

Trustees. The EMS delegates will only be appointed during their meeting in December.

In the afternoon, the festival was opened by a well-known piece of classical music. Kathinka Beutel, award winner of the national competition “Jugend musiziert”, played the first cello sonata Opus 38 by Johannes Brahms accompanied on the piano by her aunt Katja Buck.

Mirko Schilbach, Head of the Crisis Engagement and International Stabilisation Policy Issues Department at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, then took the audience on a journey to the higher realms of the diplomatic world. In his speech, he explained the new measures that the Foreign Office had taken since 2014 to stabilise the situation in crisis regions. This includes support for hospitals, educational



Photo: EVS/Sommer

14-year-old Kathinka Beutel plays the first cello sonata from Johannes Brahms actively supported by two members of the EVS. At the piano: Katja Buck assisted by Anselm Kreh turning the pages.

institutions and the training of security forces. Schilbach said it was important for the population in each country to win back trust in their governments. This is why to the outside world, stabilisation projects are not run under the German flag but are always implemented in cooperation with local partners.

However, a commitment to reconstruction in Syria is difficult, Schilbach admitted. Bashar al-Assad, who has been instrumental in destroying so much of the country, has won back control over large parts of the country. Currently, the maxim here in Germany is that reconstruction can only be supported on condition that the political situation in Syria also changes.

During the ensuing discussion, the audience questioned this precept. Schilbach then described the limits of the work

in his department. The elected politicians in the Bundestag and in the Federal Government were the persons responsible for any change in strategic policy. Schilbach gladly accepted to field the many questions from the audience. It was important for him to enter into direct conversation with representatives of the civil society – and after all this includes the EVS.

Katja Dorothea Buck



Photo: EMS/Buck

The EVS top management and the keynote speaker (from left to right): Executive Secretary Uwe Gräbe, Chair Kerstin Sommer, Deputy Chair Reinhold Schaal and Mirko Schilbach from the Foreign Office in Berlin.

WARM INVITATION TO THE

6th International Consultation of SiMO and NEST on

“The Impact of the Current Political and Social Developments on the Witness of the Churches – a Time for Spiritual Rebuilding?”

taking place in Göttingen and in the Coptic Orthodox Monastery of Brenkhausen (Höxter)

on 24 to 27 April 2019

Studies in the Middle East (SiMO) celebrates its 20th anniversary with the 6th International Consultation. A group of people committed to the Middle East first met in October 1999 and later became members of the SiMO Advisory Board. The first students to attend an ecumenical study year at the **Near East School of Theology (NEST)** in Beirut were sent in summer 2000. Since then, young people from Europe arrive in Beirut, delve into the culture and belief world of Christians in the Middle East and become acquainted with the social, inter-faith and ecumenical context of Protestant partners. 15 years ago, several former SiMO students and supporters founded the **“Friends of the NEST e.V.”** which has backed this work intensively ever since. Since then, several international consultations have taken place to discuss theological topics which are of common interest to Lebanese and German partners.

The **6th International Consultation** will deal with the influence of political and social developments on the witness of the churches and will discuss the issue whether it is time for a spiritual rebuilding in Syria in addition to rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure. In the European context, the question is what form of “spiritual rebuilding” is needed in view of the increasingly unchurched context. Discussion will focus on church education and school work. It will be thrilling to see how Middle Eastern and European partners can inspire each other.

The speakers come from the Middle East as well as from Germany and Austria.

The conference is open to all those interested. Many sponsors, among them the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover and the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS), make it possible to keep the costs for accommodation and breakfast to a minimum. Earners pay 90 Euro, non-earners 60 Euro.

If you're interested, please request a registration form from the EMS Middle East Liaison Desk (graebe@ems-online.org).

The final date of registration is 29 January 2019.



THE AHLI ARAB HOSPITAL IN GAZA NEEDS HELP

For many people in Gaza, the Ahli Arab Hospital (AAH) is a place of hope in a world of suffering, poverty and violence. At the moment, the hospital is in great financial difficulty through no fault of its own and is in urgent need of donations.

The AAH is a facility belonging to the Anglican Diocese in Jerusalem and the Middle East which is also the sponsoring church of the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. It is located in the centre of Gaza City. It treats over 45,000 patients every year. The AAH also offers free health care services in the surrounding villages, especially to elderly women and undernourished children, and also provides women with preventive check-ups for the early detection of breast cancer.

There is often a lack of medicines and medical equipment due to the air and sea blockades by Israel and Egypt. Diesel fuel to power the generators is scarce. And



Photo: Ahli Arab

Patients trying to recuperate from an operation.

power is vitally needed to run the operation theatres. There is also a lack of food, for example to feed underweight children and their families who seek refuge at the AAH.

According to the World Bank, only ten per cent of Gaza's population has access to clean drinking water. The sewage system has collapsed. 1.3 million of the total of 2.1 people living in Gaza are refugees who are dependent on aid from the UN aid organisation UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) which has supported Palestinian refugees in the Middle East since 1949. This is 70 per cent of the population. 77 per cent of these refugees live in poverty. From an economic point of view Gaza is nothing but a ruin. Whole branches of industry have collapsed because of the blockades. 46 per cent of the population in Gaza is unemployed. 64 per cent of inhabitants are under 25 years old.



Photo: Ahli Arab

Hospital visit

Since the beginning of 2018, the Ahli Arab Hospital has been faced with extremely difficult financial challenges. In January 2018, the USA announced they were stopping contributions to the UNRWA. In the past, the USA was the largest provider of funds for relief projects in Gaza. The USA provided US\$ 368 million in 2017 alone. For the AAH, the stop in contributions means that they only receive US\$ 14,000 a month instead of US\$ 65,000 – a reduction of 78 per cent. This is a serious cut that seriously affects the running of the hospital.



The operation theatre team mainly treats serious injuries resulting from the violent conflicts with the Israeli armed forces.

Nonetheless, the staff at the hospital together with volunteers are still trying to keep the doors open for all those who need their help. The operation theatre team mainly treats serious stomach, bone and chest injuries and burns that are the frequent result of the violent conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians. During the recent wave of violence, they treated 45 severe burns a day. Half of their patients are children.

At the beginning of November 2018, the situation got even worse for the hospital. An explosion occurred in the hot water system and this led to a massive loss

of water. The hospital was faced with a sudden loss of clean drinking water. This resulted in serious hygiene problems for the patients. It was impossible to sterilise surgical instruments or wash laundry. It also meant that no more operations could be conducted.

Katja Dorothea Buck

APPEAL FOR DONATIONS

The Ahli Arab Hospital is dependent on your donations more than ever. Please join in to help provide the people in Gaza with medical supplies so that they can at least gain renewed hope in this sector.

Please transfer your donation with the keyword Ahli Arab to the account of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools e. V. (EVS).

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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

I really benefited from reading the last issue. You always feature exciting topics and offer interesting perspectives. I would like to compliment you on a very readable and enriching magazine. I have great respect for your articles on reconstruction in Syria.

*Dr Roland Löffler,
Head of the Saxonian State Agency for
Political Education, Dresden*

my book and I would like to thank you for that. It describes such special, beautiful and authentic pictures that I love to reread it very often. And the picture of the monks on the mountain is so encouraging. Sometimes I feel as lonely as a monk on a mountain when I meditate alone in a field full of people who find it unimportant or who do not understand. Knowing that there are these men on the mountain who get up at half past two in the morning to meditate gives me strength. That is what they do. I get up later and meditate and everything has its place, I'm not alone. They follow their path, I follow my path but we share a silent and mysterious connection. Thank you very much for your words!

Eva Maria Siebert, Bad Oldesloe

May I express my special thanks to you for your articles in the last Schneller issue! I read them all with great interest and appreciated how they make the situation in the Middle East more understandable through different perspectives!

Dr Konrad Elsässer, Frankfurt am Main

To the author Hedda Klip who wrote the article "A stable on a mountain" in Schneller Magazine 4-2017.

You wrote an article entitled "A manger on a mountain" in Schneller Magazine 4-2017. It was about the monks on the mountain in Lebanon. For several years, I have a book in which I write or cut and paste texts which mean a lot to me because they give me hope, comfort or advise me to stay on my path. Your article is now in

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The Schneller Schools are dependent on your donations.

We look forward to your support of the work of the Schneller Schools.

Please visit us on the Internet at www.evs-online.org



This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24 (NRSV)



**EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools**

