



Talking to each other

The opportunities of interreligious dialogue

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Dear Reader,

It is probably a truism in interreligious encounters that there are different forms of dialogue – and that a distinction should be made, for example, between a „dialogue of life“ and a theological dialogue. Nevertheless, people from the West in particular are surprised time and again when they realise in their encounters with partners from the Middle East how few issues of faith are actually discussed in many dialogue situations – and how much more is spoken about the daily struggle for public profile, the social relevance of one’s own community and the influence of the confessional courts in relation to the state.



In this issue, we give voice to people for whom dialogue is not a theory, but who themselves live in a perpetual encounter between religious communities – in the Middle East, in the Global North and sometimes with one foot in both regions. It is as much about intellectual dialogue as it is about children living together, about fundamental questions discussed in official studies as it is about intercultural experiences of young adults performing their ecumenical voluntary service.

And of course, as always, it is also about the work of the Schneller Schools, the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) and the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), each creatively continuing their work even where a long-term crisis appears increasingly to be gaining ground.

On behalf of the editorial team I send you my greetings.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Uwe Gräbe". The script is cursive and fluid.

Uwe Gräbe

Searching the inter-space for what supports us

When I talk to him, his eyes light up. A spring of deep faith bubbles up as well as inspiration but also reflectiveness. Not preaching, but inspiring. It's contagious. I feel something resonating inside me. Something moving inside me opens up a door that was previously closed – or not there at all, or only there unconsciously. It's a revelation, like a space opening up. A space where we find ourselves together in order to search for what supports us. As I experience all this, I really feel that it comes from what supports me, but it opens up again, listening, seeking, nourishing, inviting. Faith lies at the centre of all this; openness to God's work; curiosity and the joy of discovering traces of it. My heart blossoms.

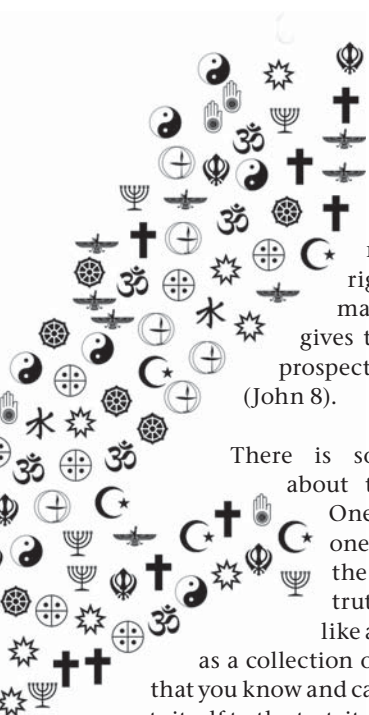
That is how I imagine interreligious dialogue to be; that is the essence. Sharing and participating in what deeply moves and concerns us. Based on inter-personal connection and trust.

I linger on the prefix “inter-” – “between” religions. Without going into too much theory about a “third space”, it is exactly this kind of inter-space that is needed to make real encounters possible. It is the space where the witness of faith is expressed, his and mine, from one side and from the other; indeed it is as if it comes from two worlds, but they touch each other, approach each other and go into each other. This does not leave me unmoved, and it changes me. I need to step out of myself, so to speak, to leave myself – to



rely on the fact that the witness of faith consists precisely in putting myself on the line. In my experience, it is above all the differences that, despite all human closeness, reveal the most exciting insights and the most fruitful ideas for one's own faith.

When Jesus speaks of a “great faith”, he does so interestingly enough only in connection with non-Jews (the centurion in Capernaum Matt 8:10; the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:28). In the inter-space between His earthly ministry, the cross and the resurrection, He does the remarkable: He washes the feet of His friends. This is how a “Lord and Teacher” who has authority should act (John 13). Or I think



of the adulteress, for whom Jesus opens up an inter-space that does not question the right, but does not insist on rightness and dogmatism, but also gives the accusers the prospect of forgiveness (John 8).

There is something risky about this inter-space. One quickly finds oneself sitting on the fence. Because truth does not exist like an “object”, such as a collection of true sentences that you know and can use. Instead, it puts itself to the test, it addresses people, it serves people, it gives new perspectives. This is the place where something new can emerge, for me and for my interlocutor.

Sometimes, it seems a bit premature for me to claim the “Abrahamic” as the supporting common ground, or to identify common interests and goals as generously as possible. Dialogue loses its bite if the earnestness of the rebuff is not allowed to carry its own weight. The inter-space that characterises dialogue cannot exist when I am alone with myself or if I blend harmoniously with my interlocutor.

It would also be naïve, or at least very idealistic, to think of the inter-space without the real issues of power, the discussions about exclusion and superiority or the blatant and subtle mechanisms of

discrimination. From this perspective, dialogue is only individual and personal in a very specific sense. On a larger scale, other issues come into play, such as responsibility for communities, churches, the social and political dimension and much more. Dialogue does not happen in a vacuum and cannot remain experimental; it has to be theologically thought through and socially validated. In this way, dialogue has different levels and can be pursued with different goals.

One might think that the identification of religious similarities contributes to peaceful coexistence or that the “defusing” of theological antagonisms is a prerequisite for social peace. “Claims of speaking the truth” are seen as causes of intolerance. However, such a blending of theological and socio-political dialogues is misguided in its approach.

Instead, what is needed is a reminder of the concept of tolerance, which is about tolerating what is fundamentally and permanently different. It is a sign of the inter-space. Let us open ourselves to what is entrusted to us and what moves us, to encounter the other in love and clarity in the same way as the other encounters us with all that he or she is and has to offer. What we have in common does not lie in specific religious content, but in mutual respect as creatures accepted by God and the common struggle to fulfil our good contribution to togetherness in the here and now.

*Rev. Dr. Friedmann Eißler
is the Islam Advisor of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in Württemberg.*

It's about life and reconciliation

Challenges of interreligious dialogue in Lebanon and Europe

There are different ways of engaging in dialogue. This becomes clear when an expert from outside looks at our own and compares the forms of interreligious dialogue in Europe with those in Lebanon, for example.

Interreligious dialogue has four types. “Polemical” has its roots in hatred and hostility. “Cognitive” is based on a fundamental acceptance built on positive or negative experiences with the other. “Peacemaking” is congruent with coexistence and the common good. And “partnership” means interreligiously working together to achieve socio-political goals. The four types can also be described by four questions. Who is right? Who are you? How can we live together peacefully? What can we do to make the world a better place?

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region has long been marked by religious conflicts and by tendencies that overemphasize a sense of belonging to a particular community. In Lebanon in particular, religion has been transformed from a mere instrument of personal belief into a hostile apparatus that deepens the gap between communities. Religion no longer belongs to the “personal,” but rather shapes the “public”.

However, interreligious dialogue is always about relating the different parameters of the respective religions in such a way that the similarities of all religions are celebrated, the differences are recognized as markers of each religion's success, and the fact is accepted that the existence and

success of one religion benefits all and harms no other religion. Only when this level of peaceful coexistence exists can interfaith dialogue flourish.

The impact of the civil war in Lebanon

The Constitution of Lebanon declares that no authority is legitimate that violates the “Pact of Common Existence”. The Taif Agreement, which ended the civil war in 1989 after 15 years, mandates elections based on the principle of proportional representation of Muslims and Christians in the legislature, and maintains the proportion of Christians and Muslims at fifty percent each. At the time,

There has been a relative peace between the religions in Lebanon since 1990. But this does not solve the country's problems. In autumn 2019, hundreds of demonstrators protested against the corruption of the elites and economic decline.



interfaith dialogue in Lebanon was exclusively “polemical,” as religious and sectarian hostilities had played a major role in the civil war. The agreement began the transition in Lebanon from a “polemical” interreligious dialogue based on violence to a “cognitive” dialogue that led to the end of the war.

According to recent estimates, 33.7 percent of Lebanese are Christians, compared to 61 percent Muslims, of whom about equal numbers are Sunni (30.6 percent) and Shiite (30.5 percent), and a smaller proportion are Alawites and Ismailis. Christians include members of the Maronite Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, and Protestant churches. Another 5.7 percent of Lebanese profess to

be Druze, and less than 1 percent are adherents of other smaller religious minorities such as Judaism, Baha’ism, Buddhism and Hinduism.

In Lebanon, religion plays a major role in culture, society, politics and the legal system. Parliamentary seats are distributed on the basis of religious affiliation. This is intended to prevent one religious group from receiving preferential treatment over another. However, it is also clear here that interreligious dialogue in Lebanon – even if it shows traces of “peacemaking” – is highly dependent on everyone thinking in terms of “partnership”.

The Lebanese legal system also differentiates along religious lines. Religious courts are responsible for many personal legal matters (such as marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance), which follow different rules and procedures. Thus, a person’s religion is an essential component of his or her social and civic identity.

The interreligious dialogue in Germany

In Germany, interreligious dialogue is institutionalized quite robustly. At the local, regional, national, and international levels, interfaith, multifait, or state-interfaith actors are brought together. This is nothing new, but it has gained considerable momentum over the past twenty years. At the local level, for example, there are 59 percent of the 270 identified Christian-Muslim dialogue initiatives that have emerged since 2001 in Germany. At the regional level, “interfaith forums” have been established in several locations since the early 2000s. And at the international level, the German Foreign Office established the working group “Peace Responsibility of Religions” in 2016 to strengthen cooperation among religious communi-



Christelle Hoyek/unsplash



ties and awareness of each other. Unfortunately, it is still open whether this work will continue under the new red-green-yellow government.

Today's Western Europe, and Germany in particular, can be used as an example of the "peacemaking" and "partnership" type of interreligious dialogue. While in Europe religious communities are mobilized and dialogue is institutionalized, Lebanon deliberately does not mobilize the various communities so that healthy "peace-building" and "partnership" can succeed apart from any sectarian tendencies.

But there are also organizations in Lebanon that are consciously committed to interreligious dialogue and channel its power. Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR), founded in 2010, is one of them. The core element of DLR is to bring together different communities, especially the youth, and give them the opportu-

nity to visit each other's homes in order to better understand each other's lifestyles and belief systems. In this way, differences can be bridged and similarities celebrated, making living together all the more natural.

The European example cannot be applied to all countries, nor can it be seen only in a positive light. After centuries of religious conflict, several European nations sided with the secularists from the late 19th century onward. They assumed that the influence of religion on world affairs would wane. When the EU institutions were established, they lacked appropriate procedures for dealing with religious issues. This changed when Jacques Delors, in his capacity as President of the European Commission, sought dialogue with religious leaders in the early 1990s. There was also discussion of the "religious roots of Europe" during the talks on a constitution for Europe.



EU/Christophe Licoppe

The EU has been holding regular dialogue with Christians, Jews and Muslims since 2007. The last meeting took place in Brussels on 23 January this year and was conducted between top officials of the EU, e.g. Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President of the EU Commission, and delegates of the umbrella associations of the three religions in Lebanon.

Communication with representatives of denominational and ideological organizations was finally formalized in the Lisbon Treaty in 2007. That in the same context countries like France continue to radically consider religion as taboo is shocking. But interreligious dialogue tends toward “polemicization”. And if there is no hostility, interreligious dialogue at best scratches the surface of differences, making dialogue more “cognitive” and less “peace-building,” in contrast to the Lebanese example of dialogue for life and reconciliation.

But religion continues to play an important role in Europe as well. This can be observed especially in the Russian-Ukrainian war. In a state where the Orthodox patriarch not only supports its country’s war against Ukraine, but also praises Russian martyrs dying on Ukrainian soil for their heroism, religion becomes a tool of aggression. The consequences for the Orthodox community are grave. The

beginning of a “polemical” and radical interreligious dialogue within the Orthodox community in Russia, Lebanon and the whole world is pre-programmed.

Both in the WANA region and in Europe, religion is used to harm instead of help. Although it may seem like an ideal, it is essential to reach a level of peace and serenity in coexistence for the sake of life. Whether at war in Europe or in the Middle East, the pervasive power of religion and faith can bring about peaceful dialogue and a fruitful experience, even when the odds are against us and many obstacles are against our favors.

Dr. Ziad Fahed is the founder and the director of the Lebanese NGO Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation.



For more information on DLR, go to [drlrlebanon](https://drlrlebanon.com) on Instagram, [DLRLebanon](https://www.facebook.com/DLRLebanon) on Facebook and [@DLRLebanon](https://twitter.com/DLRLebanon) on Twitter.

Learning how to manage differences

Dialogue conferences, fanatics and the positive sides of diversity

Dr. Nayla Tabbara is president and co-founder of the Lebanese Adyan Foundation that focuses on managing diversity. Besides knowing about the religion of the other, the success of dialogue mainly requires empathy and the certainty that the interlocutors can be united despite the differences, says the Muslim theologian.

How did you start working in the field of dialogue?

I was one of the very few Muslim students to study history at the Catholic St. Joseph University in Beirut and I took courses on Christian-Muslim relations. Following that, I was invited to take part in dialogue encounters. At the beginning, I wasn't really interested.

Why?

I grew up in a neighborhood in Beirut where Christians and Muslims have lived together for generations. That was completely normal for me. I didn't see any further need for me to work on dialogue. However, through my participation in dialogue encounters, I understood that my personal experience was something special, because most people in Lebanon live in their reference groups and don't really have much contact with the other religion.

What was that like for your parents?

My parents had a great influence on me. When the civil war broke out in Lebanon, I was three years old. Beirut became a divided city and our Christian neighbors fled to the Christian part. My parents, however, despite all the risks, went from time to

"Dialogue is not a rational matter, but an emotional one," says Nayla Tabbara.



time to the demarcation line to meet their Christian friends to ask how they were.

What do you consider to be the basic ingredients of dialogue?

I had the chance to study in Rome for a semester with a scholarship from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue. There, besides international friends, I made some Christian friends from Lebanon. I was sitting with one once and we got to talking about the civil war in Leba-



Adyan

About ...

Dr. Nayla Tabbara is president and co-founder of the Adyan Foundation. For her commitment to interreligious dialogue, to Freedom of Religion and Belief, and her work on an Islamic pluralistic theology of religious diversity, she received the Ibn Rush Freedom of Thought Prize in 2022.

non. He wanted to know what events were the worst for me at that time. I immediately thought of the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, where Christian militias, backed by the Israelis, killed many hundreds of Palestinian refugees. For my friend, however, completely different events were incriminating, which I did not remember. I realized that I had not yet understood the other half of the civil war at all.

How would you explain that?

It's a kind of cognitive dissonance to want to see your group only as victims or only as the good guys. We have different narratives that are based on emotions. In order to be able to meet the other with empathy, it is important not to immediately see in him a traitor. We must also acknowledge the suffering of the other side.

Is that all it takes for dialogue?

There also needs to be a spiritual-theological level. When I was studying in Rome, I went to Catholic Mass from time to time and learned which parts I could join in with and where I was more likely to sit in silence, such as prayers about the Trinity. I would say my own prayers in my heart during that time. One time, I felt that my prayer, and the prayer of the Christians in the church were meeting up, and going together to God, in a same act of prayer. We do not have to be similar to be united, but we can be united from within our differences. And that is a beautiful experience.

In your experience is it possible to convince a religious fanatic to dialogue with others?

You cannot convince fanatics. Dialogue is not a rational matter, but an emotional one. Whether people open themselves to dialogue is not in our hands. But we can create spaces where dialogue can take place and that allow people to be moved. And in doing so, it is important to keep identity dynamics in mind. Because anyone whose identity feels threatened will not open up.

What do you think about conferences where dialogue is discussed?

No transformation takes place at conferences. But if you really engage in dialogue, then at some point you will also have a common agenda and want to implement it for the common good. At Adyan, we call this taking religious responsibility for the whole society, not just for one's own community.

How do you get people to do that?

We work less on dialogue issues and more on helping people learn to accept and deal with differences. And we do that at different levels. We go into schools, give training, offer online tools, work with religious leaders and ensure that they integrate public life issues into their work. We also organize joint spiritual events. And it's always about seeing something positive, something enriching, in diversity.

*Katja Dorothea Buck
conducted the interview*

Adyan-Foundation

The Adyan Foundation is a Lebanese non-governmental organization that has been working since 2006 to manage diversity, promote solidarity and protect human dignity. "Adyan" is Arabic for "religions".

The Foundation works on various local, regional and global programmes to achieve Inclusive Citizenship. It aims to promote coexistence between the different religious communities in Lebanon through educational programmes – also by empowering people to take religious responsibility for the whole of society.

Adyan has also produced several films on interreligious dialogue, including *From War to Reconciliation* in which two former militiamen talk about their experiences in the civil war, how in the beginning it was perfectly normal and right for them to kill people from the other religious community. It is touching to hear both of them talk about the steps they had to take to be able to approach the other and reconcile. Both admit that at the beginning they knew nothing about the other's faith. The films can be viewed on the Adyan website.

For the past year, the Adyan Foundation has also been working in Iraq. The Foundation has its office in Erbil, capital of the autonomous region of Kurdistan.

<https://adyanfoundation.org/>



Worldwide recognition for the Schneller Schools

Stuttgart (EVS). The Schneller Schools are repeatedly mentioned internationally as an example of successful peace education. This is where Prof. Dr Johannes Lähnemann has played a major role. The renowned expert on interreligious learning, interreligious dialogue and the subject of world religions in the classroom has worked for many years on the Executive Board of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools.



Johannes Lähnemann

In his lecture “No Peace among Nations and Religions without Interreligious Learning and Peace Education”, which he gave online earlier this year for the Oxford Interfaith Forum and which had an audience from the Middle East to California, he explicitly addressed peace education at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. Among other things, this lecture was the reason for the jury to select the Oxford Interfaith Forum from 120 applications for one of this year’s three awards of King Abdullah II’s Prize for Interfaith Harmony. The Oxford Interfaith Forum promotes cooperation between academics, professionals and policy makers around the world.

In addition to his many years of lecturing at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg (1981 to 2007), where he continues to be involved as an emeritus professor, Lähnemann established the educational work of the Foundation Weltethos in Tübingen in collaboration with Hans Küng. He was also a co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Islamic Religious Education, one of the first German training centres for Islamic religious teachers.

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools congratulates and thanks Johannes Lähnemann for his tireless commitment to interreligious dialogue and his attachment to the work of the Schneller Schools.

Katja Dorothea Buck



The lecture mentioned above can be viewed on YouTube:
<https://t1p.de/v1xqh>

It's all about Jesus Christ, not Christianity

Engagement with Muslims in a loving, respectful, prophetically critical and honest way

The starting point of many engagements between Christians and Muslims is the God in the Bible, i.e. the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Islam can easily relate to this. However, the Lebanese theologian Martin Accad pleads for placing Jesus Christ at the centre of an engagement with Islam.

I have been involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue for over 20 years now, and I have discovered along the way that Jesus is a more fruitful starting point than some generic conversation about God. I call this the kerygmatic engagement with Islam and Muslims, i.e. a dialogue in which the proclamation of the Gospel plays an important role.

This kind of engagement is Jesus-focused rather than Christianity-focused where God encountered us first in a manner as a helpless baby, engaged us with his gracious teaching and a life lived for others rather than for the self, leading to the cross as the ultimate demonstration of love and self-givingness. The Jesus kerygma for us too is not primarily propositional but it is our life lived out for the sake of others and for the common good. Some may argue that such a kerygma is not complete without doctrinal affirmation, and they may be right. But it is the starting point chosen by God himself in the gospels and it can therefore be adopted confidently as our own starting point. Living a life that contributes to peace in our multi-faith societies may not yet fit within the category of soteriology (related to salvation), but it is a crucial part of the gospel of peace, nevertheless.

Kerygmatic engagement is supra-religious and this affirmation disengages Christian-Muslim dialogue from some cosmic battle of religions. Jesus himself adopted this approach. For example, in his encounter with Nicodemus in John 3, he challenges the centrality of Jewish descent from Abraham as the key to entering the Kingdom of God. Instead, Jesus provides the invitation to be “born again” from the Spirit rather than from flesh as the new doorway into the Kingdom.





Jesus in focus: window of the Kruiskerk in Dordrecht, Netherlands.

Paul Zoetemeijer/unsplash

In John 4, Jesus meets the Samaritan Woman at the “well of Jacob,” Jacob being a central figure for salvation in the Samaritan religion. And he substitutes Jacob with himself as the spring of living water through whom non-Jews are invited into the Kingdom of God. In the same way, as disciples of Jesus, we were not taught to invite Muslims out of Islam and into Christianity, but rather to invite all human beings into the Kingdom of God by meet-

ing and following Jesus, whether they be Christians, Muslims, Jews, or of any other religion or world view.

Kerygmatic engagement is loving, respectful, prophetically critical, and honest. Our engagement with Muslims should be loving toward all. It should be respectful of the complexity of Muslim religion that manifests itself according to various interpretations across history and geography. It is also critical of violent manifestations unfit for respectful human interaction. It engages honestly with the past and with our corresponding scriptures and histories.

The Schneller schools are places where everyone should feel respected and loved, regardless of their religious, ethnic, socioeconomic backgrounds or gender. The Jesus-centered kerygma provides the model and teaching through which children, teachers, and staff can feel that they belong and are safe.

For me, it is essential to emphasize that the kerygmatic approach to Christian-Muslim interaction is thus devoid of polemical aggressiveness, apologetic defensiveness, existential adaptiveness, or syncretistic elusiveness; not because any of these other four approaches is necessarily wrong, but because that is the nature of the kerygma: God’s gracious and positive invitation of humanity into relationship with himself through Jesus.

Martin Accad lectures on “Islam and Christian-Muslim Dialogue” at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. He is also active at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut, where he founded and directs the Institute for Middle East Studies

Confronted with each other's religion from an early age

Religious coexistence at the Theodor Schneller School

As a Christian institution in an Islamic country, the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman is ideal for interreligious encounters and exchange. Christian and Muslim children live together in so-called families at the school's boarding home. This is a peculiarity in a country where there are hardly any households with mixed religions.

Religion plays a major role in Jordan, both culturally and legally. But on the whole, religions tend to stay out of each other's way. Christians often keep to themselves for various reasons, while Muslims, who form a large majority of the population, have no reason to engage with Christianity. Legal hurdles such as the ban on leaving Islam or restrictions on interreligious marriages also make dialogue difficult. As a result, people know little about each other, and this can lead to fear of "the other" and sometimes even to violence. That is why security forces often provide security in front of churches on Christian holidays. An educator at the boarding home said: "If people would talk to each other, this would not be necessary."

However, at the TSS, the children are confronted with their religious counterparts from an early age. The Christian teaching staff make no secret of their faith. They emphasise the similarities between the religions without denying

You can't tell who is Christian and who is Muslim here, but you can tell that they are all friends.



the differences. They often speak of "our Lord" when talking about God with the children who ask questions about Christian life or the Bible. On the other hand, there are questions about Islam and Muslim life, which the children then answer the best they can.

Of course, there are also conflicts at the TSS, for example when a Christian student is careless with the name of the Prophet or a Muslim forbids his Christian classmate to draw pictures of people, as this is considered a sin in Islam. These problems are usually taken very seriously and the people in charge at the boarding home try to clarify the situation and bring about understanding.

Recently, for example, there was unrest among the Muslim boys because two other boys had talked during prayers and distracted them from praying. The educator then reminded the children to respect prayer and its importance. Even if one's own religion is not affected, respect for



Lisa Schmotz

God is an important Jordanian value that is taken seriously by both Christians and Muslims alike.

As a rule, students at the TSS do not acquire any enormous knowledge about each other's religions. What the children actually acquire is understanding and acceptance. They recognise the other religion and respect each other's customs and traditions. They also learn many similarities between the two religions, such as praying to the one God, fasting, resting, gathering with family and praying on holidays. Prayer is a special similarity here, which is also emphasised at the boarding home before meals. All children pray the same grace together and end with "Amen".

During Ramadan, which began this year on 23 March, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. However, this holy month is not only about abstinence. Ramadan is about building a stronger connection to God, remembering the Prophet Muham-

mad and creating one's own inner peace. Hitting and swearing are not allowed, especially during this time, which is probably most difficult for the children at the boarding home.

Things change at the boarding home during this time. Many Muslim children go home for Ramadan to celebrate breaking the fast in the evening with their families. At the boarding home, everyday life continues, only with a smaller staff. The children who are fasting wake up before sunrise so that they can still have breakfast. At the normal meal times, only the Christian children come together with their educators and us volunteers. Sometimes there are only a handful of us in each group. But the children don't miss the daily football game, even if it takes place in the burning Jordanian sun. At Iftar, breaking the fast in the evening, the whole "family" finally eats together again:

Benedikt Feick and Edgar Schnaittacher are volunteers in the Ecumenical Youth Volunteer Programme (EYVP) at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman until mid-June. For more information go to ems-online.org/oejp

Ramadan and Easter at the kindergarten

Interreligious encounter between preschool children

For kindergarten children, faith is part of the “total package of their being”. They believe what they are taught at home, but at the same time they sing along with every song in the kindergarten if this makes them happy. And if these songs contain something Christian, spaces are needed for conversation and reflection where the children can think about what they have heard different at home or in the media.

Monday morning in the building block corner of a kindergarten in Berlin. Four-year-old Mamadou is looking at a picture book. “Ramadan... Ramadan...” he chants to himself with pleasure, clearly enjoying the word he has memorised so well. Hamudi, five years old, is building with wooden bricks next to him. “You don’t even know what Ramadan is,” he comments about Mamadou’s words, without taking his eyes off his construction project. Mamadou and Hamudi are best friends.

On Friday, we spoke about the fact that the month of Ramadan had begun. I asked our Muslim children if Ramadan was celebrated at home. They couldn’t (or didn’t want to) say much about it at that moment, so I said a few words about it. We talked about the fact that people have different religions and believe differently. Anna said, “My family doesn’t believe in any God at all. My sister says, ‘God is just air.’” Then, with the help of our kamishibai (Japanese paper picture theatre), we watched a Bible story about Jesus in preparation for Easter.

Back to Mamadou and Hamudi in the building block corner. I am quite pleased that one child picks up the keyword of Ramadan and another reacts to it. But the boys do not really have a conversation about it. Both children find it difficult to put their thoughts into words so that the other can understand or relate to it. Hamudi obviously has an idea that Mamadou is not a Muslim. I haven’t a clue what he bases this on. So I suggest to them, “Hamudi, why don’t you tell Mamadou about Ramadan? Who celebrates it in your family?” “Mum and my sister,” Hamudi answers quietly. “And me,” he adds. He answered me because I can ask specific questions. We hear nothing more from Mamadou on the subject for the moment.

I work in a Protestant kindergarten in Berlin with 130 places for children from one year old up to school age. Our objective is to be a place for children from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds to learn and live in, where they are accepted, appreciated and respected. More than half of our children come from “families with a non-German language of origin” (i.e. languages other than German are spoken at home). Our children have family ties to different countries, spread over all continents.

What do these families believe? I really don’t know very much about that. A mother’s headscarf or chador tells you that she belongs to a Muslim family, but in order to say more about their tradition, religious community and their beliefs, I would have to be much more knowledgeable



Children can retell stories they have heard using a Japanese paper picture theatre.

about these things. I wonder how many religions are hidden from me in this big day-care centre?

When we talk to parents, it's about other things; religion or faith are usually only touched on in passing. The kindergarten management explains to parents during the admission interview that our educational activities are based on fundamental Christian values, that we pray with the children, sing Christian songs and tell stories from the Bible. However, we do it in a consciously "culturally sensitive" way, i.e.

realising that people believe differently and hold very different world views.

The three to seven year olds I am with every day see faith as part of the "total package of their being", i.e. they do not see it in isolation. They believe what they are taught at home, but at the same time they sing along with every Christian song if this makes them happy. I am aware that this happens without thinking at this age. So there is always a need for spaces for talking and reflecting where the children are challenged to think about what

they have heard elsewhere (at home, in the media, etc.). Then they hear songs with lines like “God made the sand, and that was really good” stand next to “Sand is made when stones hit each other” and “My mum says God doesn’t exist...”. Children who actively participate here are al-



Dorothee Beck

By intuitively creating with the use of religious symbols, kindergarten children develop a connection to spirituality.

ready able to articulate at a high level and can understand and relate to what others say. Not all the children in my group can do this. Those who are able to share something about their own religion at this age and consciously perceive other faiths or world views have usually experienced and had religious matters explained to them at home. When I tell the children a Bible story, I do it as interactively and holistically as possible. Nevertheless, children with short spans of concentration and lower language skills have less enjoyment and participate less than others.

Most of the religious impulses at our kindergarten stem from Evangelical Christianity. This probably appeals especially to the children who can relate strongly to this. Compared to a day-care group where no religious education is discussed at all, our impulses from the Christian faith offer all children an opportunity to come into contact with spirituality. Children have a right to religion; at this age they are still very connected to all visible and invisible worlds.

Educational justice remains the great challenge. The inequality that exists hinders interreligious encounter between children and their families. Nevertheless, I think it is great that children from such different backgrounds get to know each other at our kindergarten. I am convinced that this is how society can develop from the inside out. Diversity remains. We will not overcome every barrier. But we can learn that as people of different faiths – as well as people who are distant from faith – there is more that unites us than separates us.

Dorothee Beck is an educator in Berlin. She is well acquainted with the work of the Schneller schools. From 2004 to 2017, she was an ecumenical co-worker at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon.

A short look back at Schneller history

Two organs once stood in the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem. In 1898, the institution received its first organ on the occasion of Kaiser Wilhelm II's visit to the Holy Land. However, it was completely destroyed in a major fire in 1910. The second organ originally had 16 stops. It was later extended to 27 stops and 6 more stops were added in 1938. This made it the largest organ in the Middle East. Both organs, like the organ now to be rebuilt in Am-

man, came from Weigle, the organ company in Echterdingen near Stuttgart .

The Schneller family was not only very musical. They must also have enjoyed writing poetry. On 1 September 1909, Ludwig Schneller, son of Johann Ludwig Schneller, the founder of the Syrian Orphanage, wrote the following poetic letter. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of the institution.

*Als Kaiser Wilhelm lobesam
Zum heiligen Land gezogen kam,
Da spendeten mit mildster Hand
Zwölf Herren aus dem Schwabenland
Dem Syrischen Waisenhaus zum Fest
Schnell eine Orgel aufs allerbest.
Und als den Kaiser ich dann führte
Durchs ganze Syrische Waisenhaus,
Der Meister schnell die Tasten rührte
Dass sie erklangen mit Sturmgebraus.*

*Der Kaiser und die Kaiserin,
Die hörten mit erstauntem Sinn
Und fragten: „Lieber Herr,
Wo kommt die schöne Orgel her?“
Ich sprach: „Herr Kaiser, aus jenem Land
Wo Eurer Väter Wiege stand!
Dort hat man seit des Rotbarts Zeiten
An guten Streichen hohe Freuden,
Sie sind bekannt im ganzen Reiche,
Man nennt sie halt nur Schwabenstreiche.“
Das hat den Kaiser bass erfreut.
Er sprach: „das sind doch wackre Leut!
Wohin ich auch kam im heiligen Land,
Der Schwaben Spur ich immer fand.“*

*Doch ist zu unsrer großen Trauer
dort weit und breit kein Orgelbauer
Du findest keinen im ganzen Land
Am Bache Krith und Jordanstrand.*

*Holt schleunig doch vom Schwabenland
Den Orgelmeister wohlbekannt!“
Fürwahr das ist ein guter Treffer -
Doch da sitzt grad der Haas im Pfeffer!
Der Orgelmeister braucht zur Reis'
Und Arbeit 1000 Mark als Preis.*

Short synopsis of the poem: When Kaiser Wilhelm went to the Holy Land, 12 gentlemen from Swabia donated an organ to the Syrian Orphanage. When the organ was played, the Kaiser and Kaiserin were so enchanted, they asked the Lord where the organ had come from. The answer came "from your own country", whereupon the Kaiser was full of praise for the outstanding workmanship of his countrymen whose fame had even reached Jerusalem. He called for an organist from Swabia and was surprised it would cost 1000 marks to pay for his journey and stay in the Holy Land.

We would like to thank Heidi and Ulrich Kadelbach for bringing this poem to our attention. It shows once again the significance that an organ had for the Schneller family.

From Wendlingen to Jordan

Progress in the „An Organ for Amman“ project

In the coming months, the organ of the former St John's Church in Wendlingen am Neckar will be installed in the Christ Church of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS). In the meantime, the instrument with its 17 stops has travelled a long way.

The first visit to the organ in mid-February was a shock. It lay dismantled into all its component parts in an old, delapidated gymnasium in the industrial area of Wendlingen. More than a thousand pipes, made of wood and tin, wind chests, sound boards, console, parts of the organ case... all stacked under the wall bars and basketball hoop. It has been lying there for almost three years – the Weigle organ that the Echterdingen company installed in St John's Church in Wendlingen in 1968. In March 2020, the church was deconsecrated and demolished a few months later. Today, the site is occupied by a community centre and a diaconal institution.

A layman has absolutely no idea how all the bits and pieces in the unheated gymnasium can be rebuilt into a rich-sounding instrument. But after more than an hour of looking around, organ builder Gerhard Walcker from Saarbrücken is certain that everything appeared to be still there, so it was definitely worthwhile to go through the effort of transporting it to Amman and rebuilding the organ in the Theodor Schneller School.

In March, Walcker and his son returned to Wendlingen and carefully packed the component parts. It took them a good two

weeks. By the end of March, everything was ready to be transported in a large shipping container. It went by freight forwarder to Bremerhaven and there onto a ship that took the organ across the North Sea, the Bay of Biscay, through the Strait of Gibraltar, the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, where the container was reloaded onto a ship to Aqaba. At the beginning of May, the news came that it had arrived at Aqaba.

This summer, Gerhard Walcker and his son will reassemble the many component parts into an organ. They plan to spend about three months doing it. They will be supported by Issa Najjar, the master carpenter at the TSS. Before the organ can be set up against a side wall in the church, new wooden mountings must be made to replace the old steel girders. Not only that, three or four of the front pews which came from the old Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem have to be moved to the gallery and new, shorter ones made.

When everything fits and is working properly, the organ will be inaugurated in a dignified ceremony. This will all take place during a joint, live service simultaneously broadcast in Amman and Wendlingen. On Sunday, 12 November 2023, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools will also hold its annual General Meeting in Wendlingen. Since Sundays in Jordan are normal working days and no one can come to the Christ Church in Amman in the morning, the service will only take place in the afternoon at about 3.30 pm as a fitting close to the General Meeting.



A layman has absolutely no idea how all the bits and pieces in the gymnasium can be rebuilt into an organ.



EVS/Gräbe

This was an organ, and shall become one again. The team of the Saarbrücken organ builder Walckers stowing away the individual parts.

Church music director Klaus Schulten, who was organist at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem a few years ago, will give a lecture on organs in the Middle East at the General Meeting. On the following weekend, he will inaugurate the organ with a public concert in Amman.

Katja Dorothea Buck

More details on the 2023 General Meeting in the next issue.

Transporting and building the organ is expensive. This is why we are appealing for donations. Those who donate at least €250 will have their name inscribed on the side walls of the organ.

Donation account: Evangelischer Verein für die Schneller-Schulen
 Evangelische Bank eG
 IBAN DE59 5206 0410 0000 4074 10
 Purpose: Organ TSS

“My home – the Theodor Schneller School“

Photo project by students at the TSS

In spring, former volunteer Lisa Schnotz asked children and young adults from the boarding home at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) to photograph their favourite sites on the school grounds as well as moments in their everyday lives in the residential groups or at school.

They were asked to show what the TSS means to them. The comments under the photos are from the students themselves who took the photos. Lisa Schnotz, who is also a member of the Executive Board of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools, translated them from Arabic.



“Two photographers.” (Photo by Elian, grade 8)



“The boarding home is a place we will leave behind on our feet, but our hearts will stay here forever.” (Elias, grade 10 and Zaid, grade 9)



“The photo makes me happy because it shows the school in my favourite season, spring. The flowers and the blue sky put me in a good mood.” (Zaineab, Grade 10)



"While we wait for the sun to set during Ramadan so we can finally eat iftar, we have some fun together."
(Lujen, Grade 8)

"My dorm mate is obviously happy here. Behind her my other sisters rush past. Soon play break will be over and we'll go in to do homework."
(Zaineb, Grade 10)



"This goal has been here since I came to the boarding home in first grade, and I've spent every lunch break here since first grade."
(Ziad and Ziad, both grade 10)





"This is Yusef. He is like a brother to me. I am grateful to call the boarding home my second home and to have found so many new brothers." (Yusef, grade 7)

"Friends are one soul in two bodies." (Ali, grade 10)



"Perspectives."
(Photo by Ziad and Ziad,
both grade 10)



“We took this group photo as a souvenir because it will be our last few months we spend together in one class before we all go to different schools after graduation.”
(Roya, Salsabeel, Tarteel, Zaineb, Shahd, grade 10)

“The two photographers from grade 10: Ziad and Ziad.” (Elian, grade 8)



“Spring is the most beautiful season at Schneller.”
(Photo by Ziad and Ziad, both grade 10)

When crises are here to stay

A statement from the EVS Secretariat

Corona Fund, Lebanon disaster relief, emergency aid for salaries, reconstruction aid after the Beirut harbour explosion, electricity generator aid, earthquake disaster relief... For the past three years, the folders referring to all kinds of emergency aid and disaster relief have been piling up in my filing cabinet and on my PC. What does that mean for Schneller work?

Our donors have generously responded to the many appeals for help over the past three years; we were able to give several hundred thousand euros to our brothers and sisters, especially in Lebanon (but also in Jordan), in order to stand in solidarity with them during the enormous crises of recent times. For this, we are truly grateful.

At the same time, however, the regular donations for the “normal operation” of the Schneller schools dropped by several hundred thousand euros for the first time last year. Apparently, the focus of donations has shifted. We can offset this shortfall for a certain time. After all, when people talk of a “crisis”, it is basically assumed that this is a kind of exceptional situation that will end eventually and then things will somehow return to “normal”.

But more and more the question arises, what if this basic assumption is wrong? What if crises become long-term are here to stay? What if the corrupt elites in Lebanon manage to run their country down to the level of Somalia, if Syria and Iraq never get back on their feet, if Israel is led to the brink of civil war by a government



that is part criminal and part worship of a delusional political messianism – and if, in the midst of all these millstones, Jordan would also break apart due to its internal tensions?

This is obviously a “worst case scenario” that will certainly not happen in every point listed. But if only one or two of these scenarios were to occur, what then? Do we



Robert Metz/unsplash

How do you illustrate the topic of crisis?

Since 2018, this photo by Hamburg-based photographer Robert Metz has been particularly popular with graphic designers. What is its advantage? It can be used to illustrate texts on a wide variety of crises – including this one from the work of the EVS Secretariat.

switch our Middle East work completely to long-term crisis mode and drag ourselves from one emergency appeal to the next? Or do we concentrate on the one area that has been the core of our work for the past 163 years, i.e. providing the children at the Schneller Schools, regardless of religion and origin, with a good education “so that they may eat their own bread in honour” – even if the world is collapsing

around them? We, the friends of the Middle East and Schneller work, have to talk to each other about such issues.

But the work has also changed in other ways since Covid-19. The other night I stood in the cold rain, waiting at a German small-town train station, feeling frustrated. I had spent six hours to prepare and give a lecture, including travel to and from the venue – and only five people turned up. Where there used to be 100 participants at a lecture, now there are often only ten. And where there were once 50 “before Covid”, sometimes there are only five...

But there are also organisers who, with a lot of creativity, succeed in reversing this downward trend; where numerous participants (including multipliers) meet in considerable numbers – in person or online – to discuss with each other what needs to be done. It would be great if there were more of these new initiatives. By the way. The EVS Secretariat is always open to suggestions and ideas because nobody on their own can find the answers to the issues confronting us in this long-term crisis. This can only be done together, in committed dialogue – and in common prayer for those in greatest need.

Uwe Gräbe

When a homeland no longer feels like home

Many books have been written about the expulsion of the Palestinians 75 years ago and family stories about people in exile. In “Stranger in My Own Land”, Fida Jiryis reveals a largely unknown perspective. The author is well acquainted with life as a Palestinian in exile in Lebanon, the Canadian diaspora, Israel, but also in the occupied territories on the West Bank where she lives today.

Her parents Sabri and Hanneh come from Fassuta, a Christian village to the north of Galilee that was not destroyed during the Palestinian War in 1948. The families of her parents stayed and adjusted to the new circumstances. As a young man, Fida Jiryis’ father became a co-founder of Al-Ard (Arabic for “The Land”), the first Palestinian political movement in Israel, and soon came into conflict with the Israeli authorities. In 1970, he went into exile in Lebanon where he became director of the PLO’s Palestine Research Centre and advisor to Yasser Arafat.

Fida Jiryis was born in Beirut in 1973. As a child, she experienced the horrors of the civil war and the Israeli invasion in 1982. Her mother Hanneh was killed in an attack in 1983. After the Oslo Accords and as a former Israeli citizen, her father was one of the few Palestinians allowed to return to Israel in 1994 – a shock for Fida Jiryis, who was 22 at the time. The homeland she had only known from family stories did not feel like home at all.

She writes about everyday discrimination and the constant feeling of being in the wrong place. When she was looking for a flat with her then-husband, she was openly told that they did not rent to Arabs, with no apology or explanation, “as if it



Fida Jiryis

Stranger in My Own Land

Palestine, Israel and

One Family's Story of Home

Hurst and Co. London 2022

447 pages, € 28.00

was just a fact”. At a building in Nahariya, she was shocked to read a handwritten sign saying “‘No dogs, no Arabs’. We stood there staring at it. The sign was not new at all. The ink was faded and the cardboard was worn around the edges.” In 2003, she emigrated to Canada, but was unable to make herself at home there either. In 2008 she returned – but not to Israel where she no longer wanted to live, but to Ramallah on the West Bank where she still lives today and has to cope with the daily restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation.

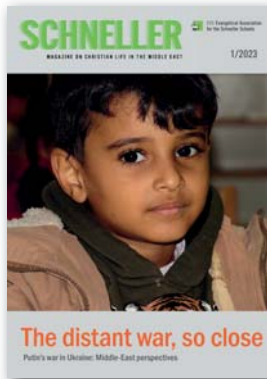
Fida Jiryis’ narrative is exciting. To make the book more reader-friendly, the publisher has also included many family photos, maps and a family tree. It is a pity that the book is still only available in English. But even so, the 447 pages are captivating because they describe world history based on the stories of real people. This is because the family history of Fida Jiryis is representative of the desperate search by the entire Palestinian people for a homeland for the past 75 years.

At the same time, the author’s personal experiences make it clear that their homeland as it constantly haunts the memories of their parents and grandparents no longer exists today. However, anyone who sets the book aside with this conclusion has not understood much about the Middle East conflict. Precisely because Palestinians lost their homeland at that time, the question of what it takes for them to feel at home must be asked more urgently today than ever before.

Katja Dorothea Buck

Reader's letters

What an exciting issue you have produced again! It was to be expected that the topic of the Middle Eastern view of Putin's war would be somewhat delicate, even exceedingly difficult. But then you show how there are perspectives on this from the Middle East that should also be perceived by us in the general public. The effects there, as in many other places in the world, are massive, and we should



Issue 1-2023
The distant war,
so close

bear them in mind, not least to put our self-pity into perspective. The tension between the oppressors, especially in Lebanon, and the hopefuls that are described at the Schneller schools again makes the significance of Schneller's work all the more apparent.

Prof. Dr Johannes Lähnemann, Goslar

Thank you for the current issue of the Schneller Magazine which I read in one go. The content is varied and covers important current topics. Although the response to requests for authors was rather meagre, as you noted in the editorial, the editorial team has succeeded very well in portraying the realistic situation that the Middle East is undergoing, with its sad and

happy events. I have the impression that the war in Ukraine, no matter how you look at it, is giving birth to a multipolar world order. This process is like the birth of a baby. The beginning is painful, but in the end there is joy when the baby is born.

We are currently witnessing the resumption of diplomatic relations between several countries in the region. This will hopefully help to end regional hostilities and hopefully have a positive impact on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The world economic system is also changing towards a more competitive order, which will hopefully be more just and fair.

Regarding the interesting article by Dr Stephanie Springer "...being able to stop in order to start again", it shows how the world and Christian communities have deviated from the norm. Two main issues are slowly destroying the Christian church in my opinion: firstly the legalisation of abortion and secondly the acceptance of same sex marriage in some churches. Over time, this is tearing the conventional family apart, Christian communities are being weakened and I fear it will be difficult to start again!

Thank you and your team for the excellent work you do to keep us informed about the Schneller schools and about regional and world issues.

Gaby Haddad, Amman (Jordan)

Thank you for all the work on these wonderfully informative articles. I especially thank you for the moving article about Dr Basil Rishmawi and Johnny Zacharia. They were both part of our childhood and will be sorely missed.

Aziz Shalaby, Vancouver (USA)

Regarding the report “An organ for Amman” in Schneller magazine 1/2023 and the appeal: “We are appealing for donations to cover the cost of transporting and installing the organ from Wendlingen to Amman.”

The Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem had grown into the largest educational institution in the Holy Land by the beginning of the 20th century. The highlight was the training programme to become a teacher. This included learning to play a musical instrument. Almost all organists

of successful organ teaching were a blessing for many Middle Eastern church musicians. Her enormous solidarity with the Christian members of the congregation, who are virtually all Palestinian, earned her the high praise of Bishop Samir Kafity: “She was the Mother Theresa of our church!”

Heidi Klotz-Kadelbach, Stuttgart

I was very touched by the article “If you can cry, you stay human” in the current Schneller magazine. Many thanks for publishing it!

David Müller, oicos-stiftung, Reichelsheim



in the Protestant and Catholic churches of the country were trained at Schneller. It was not until long after the Second World War, in the 1980s, that most of them had long since reached retirement age.

This widespread need prompted the leaders of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem to ask the partner organisation of the Evangelisches Missionswerk in Südwestdeutschland (EMS) to send an organ teacher to help the next generation of organists. My husband, who at the time was the Middle East Liaison Secretary at the EMS, succeeded in recruiting Elisabeth von der Decken, an excellent musician and teacher, for this position. Her years

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Translations to English: Chris Blowers

Vogelsangstraße 62 | 70197 Stuttgart | Germany
Tel.: +49 (0) 711 636 78-39 | Fax: +49 (0) 711 636 78-45
E-Mail: evs@ems-online.org | www.evs-online.org

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