

THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Taking the Chance to get Closer

Prof Dr Dr Thomas Schirrmacher is the Chairperson of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), and Director of their International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF). He is also in charge of the Working Committee for Religious Freedom of the German and Austrian Evangelical Alliance.

The growing convergence between the Protestant “factions” of Mission in Germany (to make use of this imprecise expression for once) has been in the offing for a long time. This applies both to the EMW and the Association of Evangelical Missions (AEM) and also to the Missiologists, German Society for Mission Studies (DGMW) and the German-language Evangelical Missiological Society (afem). For the last ten years Prof Dr Bernd Brandl has on behalf of afem had his place in the editorial team of the “Jahrbuch Mission” (Yearbook Mission) published by the EMW, and I myself have also been included in the Directory of German Missiologists and Religious Scholars. As a consequence of this, many Evangelical and Pentecostal contributions can be found in the Yearbook – also from authors in the Global South.

I shall never forget the year 2009, when a ZDF television programme presented the martyrs of Evangelical Mission Societies alongside Islamist suicide assassins - as though it makes no difference, whether one becomes a victim unintentionally or if one voluntarily kills oneself along with innocent victims – in other words commits murder. This programme also showed the graves of missionaries on the Korntal cemetery, who died as martyrs on the mission field. The EMW (and at their suggestion the EKD) issued a protest, not only at this disparagement of Evangelical Missions, but also decidedly pointing out that the Korntal graves belonged to members of Church Mission Societies (long before the EMW and the AEM existed) and therefore the criticism was also against the Mission of the Churches and therefore needed to be taken up directly with the Churches. This protest, while not just a one-off exercise but rather the result of a process, became the first visible sign throughout Germany that it was the conviction of all those concerned that there is only one indispensable Mission of God, to which we are all committed; and that in spite of all differences that we need to discuss concerning some of the “ways” of doing Mission, the criticism of Mission as such is something that affects us all.

If I had more space available, it would certainly be meaningful to look at basic shifts that have taken place and what changes on both sides of the Protestant factions have made these possible. I had an opportunity to do that in front of the *Academica Christiana* in Korea at a joint symposium of the WEA and the WCC, which was represented by Martin Robra. The end of the Cold War had ended much bias on both sides. The WCC had more or less denied persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union, for which in 1991 the General Secretary Konrad Raiser expressly apologised to those concerned. Similarly the WEA, with too much influence from the USA, only saw the persecution in the Soviet Union and ignored the persecution in the Islamic world and also the oppression of Christians by other Christians. Thankfully this could also be overcome quickly after 1991.

The increasing common struggle against human rights abuses must also be named here, just as the growing cooperation in solidarity against the brutal persecution of Churches and Christians in the Middle East, and also in the whole of Africa and Asia. In inter-religious dialogue the events of September 11, 2001 and the following developments led to removing the one-sided fixation on the question, whether a person could be saved through other religions or not, as suddenly it was necessary to differentiate within one religion: between branches, with whom one could cooperate in building a peaceful and just society through social and political dialogue on the one hand, and fundamentalist movements ready for violence, with whom one could not sit down at the same table, on the other hand. In Korea I also voiced the theory that while the WCC and the WEA and the theological movements behind them have moved away from the positions they held before 1990, neither of them has proceeded in a relativistic or a postmodern way; today both are theologically much more in agreement with the spiritual concerns of their founding fathers and mothers.

From two different perspectives I also had the opportunity to observe how the EMW used the opportunity of a changing global landscape - especially with regard to understanding non-Christian religions, dialogue and Mission - in order to get closer to those on the other side.

One perspective was the growing cooperation and understanding between the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). Significantly this began when a representative of the Mission Commission of the WEA became a full member of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC. Through this, the WEA also took part in the preparation of the Mission Declaration 2013. It led in January 2015 to the agreement of an official cooperation

at all levels, including the Theological Commission, as a result of which I have just taken part in a Faith and Order Commission meeting of the WCC in Romania.

And here it was quite decisive that it was representatives of the EMW in the committees of the WCC who pushed for positive changes, as substantial funds from the German member churches flow via the EMW to the CWME. From the beginning the EMW had also supported the discussions between the Vatican, the WCC and the WEA with regard to the following joint document that was agreed on in 2011. In 2006 I was called upon as an expert to attend a planned discussion process between the dialogue departments of the Vatican and the WCC, who had been commissioned to prepare a Code of Ethics concerning Mission among members of other religions.

On behalf of the WEA I developed a proposal for a process that would bring in the WEA on the side of the WCC, because such a Code only makes sense when the majority of the churches throughout the world are in agreement with it, and it is not understood as though the “good” churches only wanted to criticise the “bad” ones. Today we can hardly comprehend that, at that time, this was for all (!) concerned a great risk. The document “Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World”, which was accepted by the Vatican, the WCC and the WEA in 2011, made history in the ecumenical world, so much so, that today we cannot imagine Ecumenism and Mission without it. Its history in detail can be found on the website set up by the EMW at www.missionrespekt.de (this includes the English document and further documentation).

Even with the best will in the world I could not have imagined that this process would be transferable to Germany. In Germany we have two large players with the EKD and the Catholic German Bishops Conference (DBK), the Free Churches have their own Association, the Evangelical Alliance in Germany is not, as in most countries of the world, a Church Federation, but also allows for individual membership. For this reason the Association of Christian Churches (ACK) was seen by many churches to be the natural place for such a process; but it was also clear that in addition to it the EKD and the DBK would also have to offer their own support. Already in 2011, as afem chairperson I was able to present the document and its concerns to the annual conference of the DGWM, also then to the Federation of Evangelical Free Churches (VEF) and to the ACK, and shortly afterwards also at a seminar of the EMW and the Academy of Mission in Hamburg.

I noticed then that the times had changed. And the EMW was quite clearly willing to make use of the document, in order to bring the various mission concepts

together around the table. And so we sat together in Hamburg. Not to make out as though there had never been a problem, not in the postmodern sense, that former points of view didn't really play a role at all, but rather just the opposite – as missiologists and as Mission specialists, who wanted to discuss intensely about the contents and the “Way” of Mission.

The necessary common ground of Mission led essentially to the founding of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846, it led essentially to the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, and to the founding of the WCC in 1948. And it was not just by chance that the subject of Mission – which perhaps one would have least credited it with – not only brought almost all churches throughout the world together for the first time in 2011, but that this also succeeded in Germany. The Congress “Mission Respect” in Berlin brought churches from a wide spectrum together such as never before in German history.

Even if the German Evangelical Alliance, the AEM and the afem supported this hundred per cent from the beginning – their influence on the EKD, DBK and ACK was rather limited. For this reason, the enormous efforts of the EMW, its leadership (Christoph Anders and Michael Biehl) and the members and churches connected with them, deserve the honour of having made use of a unique chance to bring an internationally important development to Germany. The EMW got missio, as the mission branch of the DBK on board, later also the DBK itself, the EKD was represented mainly by its Bishop for Ecumenical Relations and Ministries Abroad who also is their representative in the WCC, Martin Schindehütte. The EMW was responsible for organising many discussions among all those concerned throughout Germany.

The EMW must be thanked, that Germany, where the missiological and ecumenical controversies went deeper than anywhere else over the years between 1960 and 1990, unanimously backed “Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World”, as hardly any other country in the world has. This makes clear: God's Mission is irrefutable and there can be no Christian Church without Mission, but we must continue to struggle and discuss self-critically about the “How” of Mission. That includes us as Evangelicals; and not every discussion of the “How” of Mission may be misinterpreted as criticism of Mission itself. We need this discussion about how to do it, about the ethics of Mission, if Mission is to be carried out in accordance with the One, in whose name we carry out the task -- our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ... (Philippians 2, 5)



EMW @ Partners

A 40 Years' Journey in Ecumenical Mission





EMW and Partners

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Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland

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