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## When life ties together and religion divides.

Ritual companionship as the test case for an Authentic inter-religious dialog

### 1. Occasions of cross-religious experience in the Fed. Rep. of Germany (Statement of problem + Main thesis)

For about five decades now, since the first migrant workers and other professionals from Turkey plus their later fetched families started assisting the German reconstruction of economy and enriching our society, people from different religious or non-religious background could share their lives as neighbors and friends. – But in fact, it took at least the period of one and a half generations (during which it became clear too that migrant workers were not "going back" but became German citizens) until people realized how much they were in need to regularly also celebrate their greatest joys and grieves together, not in 'parallel societies', but rather as one society at common occasions.

Before this was realized, intercultural or interreligious confrontations seemed to be a reality faraway from actual German public life, either *historically* in remembrance of the *Holocaust* as specific German catastrophe "long ago" or *geographically*, when stories of terrorist attacks with certain religious complexion were transmitted on television. But only recently, on Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015, there was such a TV coverage on Public German TV<sup>1</sup> about the terrorist attack on a bus in Kenya, which raised the awareness of German public extraordinarily:

A group of Kenyan Muslims travelling on a bus (between Nairobi and Mandera) ambushed by Islamist gunmen protected Christian passengers by refusing to be split into groups, according to eyewitnesses. The attackers from the Somali based al-Shabab group had told all passengers to split in two groups of Muslims and Christians each sitting on the left or right seating row of the bus in order to kill the Christians as repeatedly practiced in recent past. But a number of Muslims told the militants "to kill them together or leave them alone", a local governor told Kenyan media. "The locals showed a sense of patriotism and belonging to each other," Mandera governor Ali Roba told Kenya's private *Daily Nation* newspaper. - The militants decided to leave after the passengers' show of unity, he added.<sup>2</sup>

This story, I think, was not incidentally taken up two days before Christmas in a society dealing at the moment with a *richness* (as some say) respectively with a *huge problem* (as others say) of mass-immigration of refugees from war- and underprivileged- areas of the globe. And curiously – in a sort of Pre-Christmas atmosphere – in the same News edition that day they brought a report on the just accomplished restoration of a Stained-class window including Jewish and Christian religious symbols in a German Village church (Flieden) that had been a synagogue until holocaust 1938, by the American Jewish artist

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<sup>1</sup> ZDF- heute Journal, Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015)

<sup>2</sup> BBC News Africa: Kenyan Muslims shield Christians in Mandera bus attack, retr. 23.12.2016, from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35151967>. When al-Shabab killed 148 people in an attack on Garissa University College in April, the militants reportedly singled out Christians and shot them, while freeing many Muslims. Last year, a bus was attacked near Mandera by al-Shabab militants, who killed 28 non-Muslims travelling to Nairobi for the Christmas holidays.

Barney Zeitz<sup>3</sup>. But apart from Christmas visions and Refugee oriented public discussions in present Germany, which occasions of interreligious fellowship and accompaniment of Christians, Muslims, Jews, people of agnostic orientation and again others have we come across in recent decades so that they could provoke us to look for adequate formations of celebration agendas and liturgies??

Among a great number of different occasions I would sketch the following three types most frequent:

- A. Getting to know each other also as religiously active neighbors in the same communes and municipalities religious communities have more and more learned to invite each other to the celebrations of major religious feasts, such as: Muslims inviting church elders and Synagogue representatives to come to "end of Ramadan celebration", Christians inviting Muslims and Jews to be guests in their families on Christmas eve, Jews practicing festival hospitality to Christians and Muslims for an evening in Chanukah period, etc.
- B. Unique and common public mourning ceremonies as after catastrophic occasions such as a brown-cole mine accident in my church almost 30 years ago when Christians and Muslims and people without faiths were among the dead. Or:
- C. The celebration of different rites of passage in biographical terms, not so much for occasions of individual initiations such as Baptism, Bar Mitzvah or Circumcision, but rather in situations of collective rites of passage like in school beginners' ceremonies.

Due to such demands religious institutions and their professionals in ministries and theology have developed the following three models of celebration respectively liturgies:

- (1) The model of "Liturgical hospitality", when one denomination or religious community is in charge of the respective liturgy and representatives of other communities are present as guests without opportunity of concelebrating actively (rather only conveying an official word of greeting from their community). This oldest model is generally accepted and meanwhile widely practiced.
- (2) The model of "Multi-religious celebrations"; in this case both denominations or Representatives from different religious communities contribute passages from their respective tradition fitting into the theme, respectively in counseling care for people concerned from their specific faith community. This model is more and more demanded in practice and also realized due to processes of theological clarifications such as: In these cases two religious communities concelebrate, but at the same time are fully respecting how differently the traditions present are in their liturgical approaches.
- (3) A third model presented until now is that of a so called "Interreligious devotions/prayers": Here both or several different religious representatives compose a common liturgical order or common prayer texts or hymns in order to authentically express something that is being experienced and "felt" by all persons present whatever faith background they come from in *one* language only. These devotions are still seldom and very much under discussion, correctly speaking: Refused by most of the churches.<sup>4</sup> The reasons lie with theological questions that are coming up, such as: To whom are Christians and Muslims praying if praying together? Do they believe in – and could even pray to – the "same God"? Practically

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<sup>3</sup> From: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flieden>; retr. 23.12.2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lutz Friedrichs, *Interreligiöses Gebet* 2007, 279; whereby the Roman Catholic liturgists react more restrictively than Protestant Pastoral theologians, as Benedikt Kranemann, *Rituale* 7, states, probably because the relationship between collective and individual validation of authentic prayer plays a role; cf. also Friedrichs, op. cit. 290 and Meyer-Blanck, op. cit. 2f.

speaking: Can they fuse texts from different religious descent and history of Holy Scriptures (Bible and Quran), as if they came from the same revelatory background?

As this development of liturgical models has got stuck with these three alternatives making the third one as it stands just appear as something hardly ever reachable, I consider it necessary to smoothen this discussion and development by presenting religio-sociological and theological arguments in favor of all three of them in different cases of societal life, but in specific by highlighting a cross dimension of all three models respectively forming from it an additional model. My hypotheses in that are:

(1) Each of the three models can be practiced in different situations if appropriate. Meaning: None of them should be played against the others claiming to be the only right one, unfortunately in interreligious circles often going along with the futile suggestion that only the third one carries the right potential for a future multicultural and multi-religious German society, but yet can't be reached realistically.

(2) But, the practicability of each depends on the grade in which it can authentically fulfill the following criteria of a ritual competence<sup>5</sup>:

(a) Performers of the order of celebration as well as those participating are *more or less familiar with each other* from common daily life or they have been brought together by a specific event (such as a wedding or an accident) tying them and their communities/families existentially inevitably together;

(b) Performers of the order of celebration as well as those participating could *more or less express their own expectations of the celebration and accept and appreciate those of the other parties* involved;

(c) Performers of the order of celebration as well as those participating *are more or less aware of their own and respect the other's scheme of ritual language* and/or (sacral) place of celebration and/or the habitual ritual gestures and actions, both of them bring along, especially when one side is coming from a migration experience;

(d) Performers of the order of celebration as well as those participating are *more or less prepared to widen their own expectations concerning new experience and insights* of God / the Divine in the light of their own God-perceptions and in the mirror of the others' expressions of a ritual self.

(3) However weak or strong the above mentioned criteria of ritual competence can be fulfilled, I state that, a *certain mode of Ritual companionship*<sup>6</sup> *is already present* as a cross

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<sup>5</sup> Here I combine two aspects that are often kept apart: ritual competence in terms of competent performance (leader) and in terms of cultural-anthropological disposition (participants). With this I refer to Paul Post, *Überfluss und Unvermögen* 54, 62, in the tradition of Liturgical reception of Ritual studies and its early discoveries of "emerging rituals" (Ronald Grimes) resp. its detection of a highly irritated "ritual milieu" (cf. Post *ibid*, 70).

<sup>6</sup> For our German context I formed this term by myself, calling it "Rituelle Weggemeinschaft", but later, when translating it into the English version "ritual companionship" I found an interesting parallel (just as far as the nomenclatura is concerned) in the Rigveda, chapter VII.20 (531), verse 9, under the main headline "Agni" and subheadline "Vasishtha Maitravaruni". Here Indra is being addressed with the venerating words "Even now, ... o bounteous one, those in your charge, the men, the hymn proclaimers, are proclaiming hymns, they who by their invocations of you have distanced the niggards through ritual service, Choose us for this same yoking [=ritual companionship]", The

dimension in all three classical models. In the (i)first model people of different faiths come together at an event of one party, following the mode of sheer hospitality and mutual respect and acknowledgement of good neighborhood (*passive ritual companionship*). In the (ii)second it is more that ties together: At least there is a common theme or even more: a common existential concern (*emerging ritual companionship*). In our (iii)third classical model even the theological modes of language are same, which can only be realized on the foundation of a *longly approved ritual companionship*.

(4) Having highlighted Ritual companionship as cross-model dimension in all three classical models we get aware how big the step is between an occasional experience of emerging ritual companionship in model 2 and model 3. Therefore, I cautiously propose to go further than analyzing ritual companionship as a cross dimension of different strength, but rather establishing it as a new additional model. But this model actual has to stand between the classical models 2 and 3, as here an experience of *regularly reoccurring ritual companionship* becomes the backbone of celebrating rites of passage undergone by members of different religious communities belonging to the same social setting and primal socio-structural bonds. For logical reasons of course this new model should not be called the "fourth" one, but the New third model shifting the classical third to become fourth.

With this proposal I connect the hope to give more space to the variety of interreligious forms of encounter and interaction in cross-religious liturgical communion besides theological and textual teachings and interpretation of sacred texts and besides the need of collaboration in issues of moral and ethical needs in a common society. It is widely accepted and stated for post-modern and post-secular societies in Western countries that besides public demands on religious institutions to engage in Ethical debates of overall interest (Bio-ethics debate), more and more their engagement respectively presence in situations of public ritual performance or transformation is being expected, not only tolerated.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, when talking about rituals or liturgies here, we have to refer to include rather general definition of ritual as "a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to set sequence"<sup>8</sup>, besides those specifically religious definitions such as Victor Turner's version of "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests."<sup>9</sup> A broader definition takes seriously that Humans of different faiths can accompany each other on a certain route of their life – and through

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Rigveda. The Earliest religious Poetry of India, translated by Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel B. Brereton, South Asia Research, Vol. 1, Oxford 2014, 907.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Kristian Fechtner, Riskante Liturgien, Abschnitt 4, Anfang. Zulehner 2003 yet can talk positively about the religious institutions such as churches mandate for a "diaconia" of ritual-provision to the transforming societies. For the overall relevance of *Ritual studies* in recent Science of religion, Cultural anthropology and Practical Theology of religions since the 70s and 80s of last century starting in the Canadian academia (Post et al.) and its reception in Germany cf. Benedikt Kranemann, Rituale passim. He stresses also the variety of functions rituals are given in modern and post-modern societies, such as (i)reaffirming traditions and religious institutions (Rappaport), (ii)marking a conciliary new community by changing themselves (Bell) or (iii)advancing in manifold manners of individual order-constructions (Lüddeckens). Yet, it is to be discussed whether such deliberate construction and esthetic election (cf. Paul Post, *Überfluss und Unvermögen*, 50f.) meets the deeply existential needs of rituals as we find them in traditional societies (s. below Section 4).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual>.

<sup>9</sup> This reading comes from: "Symbols in African Ritual," *Science* March 16, 1972, vol. 179, 1100-05.

their experience, in a secondary step only, so to say, the respective religious communities of the two will be encountering each other.

But in order to make my theoretical considerations more plausible to you let me turn to a specific case study which shall enable us to see concrete needs in the light of or beyond the three models of interaction.

## **2. Case study: Ritual companionship requested but ambivalently viewed** (Empirical verification)

Imagine you are a Protestant pastor in an industrially booming German town. One day a school-teacher of Religion comes to your office and consults you. He comes on behalf of his school rector and the whole collegiums having a question regarding the next Public Service for school beginners in about 5 months time. Already now, he reports, one knows that there are so many children from Muslim families to start school this year that, taking them together with beginners plus parents from indigenous population the assembly hall of the school would not take all in and therefore, he says: "even this year we hope that the school beginners service on the first day of school can take place in our town-church here..."

When listening to the request, of course you first of all ask yourself: Why do they come with such specific caution this time knowing that the fact of having many Muslim families involved in the celebration is the reason. But this, your heart rejoices, might be an excellent opportunity to bridge the gap of daily life which one often finds between Muslim communities and the Christian congregations in your town.

Actually, you would like to immediately respond: That's no problem, dear colleague, of course the school beginners service this year as every year shall be taking place here in the town church. But you know that such official requests are not to be answered and the answer anyway not to be carried by you alone, but you have to ask the church elders' council on that before.

Presenting the request of the school to your elders' council, a lively discussion starts:

Some members think that – following one Lutheran church's recent Handout to Congregations on this theme – one should rather check whether one could shift the celebration to the congregational hall (also containing about 250 people maximum) but not to the church, which is supposed to be used for Christian religious purposes only. Therefore, one should better respond negatively but kindly to the request. – You as pastor encourage them again to consider the big Chance not only to bridge the gap inter-religiously in town but also to host a high number of parents of school-beginners in your church who in their majority never come to church. Most of them in one way would like to follow your encouragement, especially as you respond negatively to some who ask whether the cross had to be removed from the altar or a Scene of Christ's resurrection in front of all peoples' eyes to be covered with a blanket when Muslims enter the church for that event. But still, most of the elders remain skeptical asking: But Pastor, is there a liturgical Agenda for such a service. After all, you first have to postpone the decision on that issue, because you think there is no way against the deeper convictions of many elders. Therefore you rather wait and collect some more competent knowledge, and perhaps invite a colleague of the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology Hermannsburg for a workshop with the elders and further interested congregants on "Interreligious celebrations – yes or no?"

Now – if I was asked to advise these people, I would try to develop furthermore my model of “Interreligious ritual companionship” as follows.

### **3. The importance of primal life structure for the formation of Specific religious identities and a vital togetherness of Different religious communities** (Religious-historical support)

In those societies that have a chance to format their system of human togetherness for a reasonable time-span a characteristic structure of life mastery grows, in most cases build on respectively in connection with certain religious constructions and values. Especially the unavoidable stages of initiation at birth, adolescence, partnering and death confront individuals together with their intimate or closest social sphere with the need to overcoming loss, finding new orientation and starting a new life-period thereafter<sup>10</sup>. In such situation it proofs whether the neighbor as other becomes a completely other and leaves one unto destruction or assists in carrying, consoling and helping for a new start.

In different sociological types of societies different formats of central inter-human relationships have developed. In agricultural societies this is mainly the blood-related family. In others, especially semi-nomadic and nomadic societies, the age-group has become the central life structuring collective. Males and females (often through their male partners) are life-long tied to this collective and undergoing all rites of passage in solidarity with that.<sup>11</sup> But whether blood-relatives, age group or neighborhood, in almost all societies such bonds of solidarity are strongly appreciated beyond and inserted in religious adherences. There are even cases of assistance of a representative from another family or decidedly other religious community in certain sacrificial rituals of clans in traditional societies using the religiously foreign as neutral agent in situations of dangerous transfers for a save management of the transition.<sup>12</sup>

The practices of such primal religion has been supported by all secondary religions extending to traditional societies such as Islam and Christianity. African Initiated Churches on Christian and Sufi Orders on Islamic side have taken care of that, but also mainline churches have re-discovered the value of adapting Church rituals to traditional practices supportive of lives and community.

The carrying strength of such primal interrelationships in all societies, be it until now more traditionally oriented as East African ones that I have got to experience myself for a number of years, or the German society at old and today, has been proved especially in situations of collective crisis. Good examples for that are mutual visiting and strong interreligious supports from Muslim to Christian parts of a clan in East Africa, but also traditionally strong support between Jewish and Christian families in German villages and small towns in older history. These practices of solidarity were always supported by a regular participation in the other family’s or foreign ethnic neighbor’s religious practices in terms of what we call classically “liturgical hospitality”. – Vice versa one can find examples for processes of

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. the classical transitions of Life Cycle in Rites of passage according to Alfred von Glasenapp and Victor Turner.

<sup>11</sup> The Massai warrior for instance leaves the blood-related family definitely at his first important ritual of circumcision when his parents build him a small hut for the transitional period besides their place in the home kraal and plant after the ritual a ‘olim’- tree as a symbol for the age group as the coming most important collective of the young man. For the argument of specific competence in ritualism in many traditionalist societies especially in Africa see Paul Post, op.cit., 52.67.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance the Reconciliary sacrifices at the ancestral graves of forefathers in the traditional Ilyamba-Society Central Tanzania; cf. Wilhelm Richebächer, *Religionswechsel und Christologie*, Erlangen, 2003, 66-67.

deterioration of solidarity and life carrying support in times of collective crisis, if people did not adhere to such respectful practices of participation: When e.g., in my home-region around Marburg in the thirties of last century during NS terrorism in German rule Christian villagers, ethically disabled by party ideology, stopped any ritual accompaniment with Jewish neighbors at times of birth, wedding or funeral, this became an early indicator of what developed in our society coming to one of the most horrific genocides in history up to 1945, but of course understood in it's relevance only in retrospective.<sup>13</sup>

However, as long as basic life structural, respectively primal-religious formats of solidarity are being formed in a society due to free practice of religions, different identities can be founded and developed in inner-religiously and inter-religiously grown rituals. But what about societies – as we face them more and more in an area of growing globalization in all dimensions of life – in which first and second generation members of those living in a country as well as of those migrating into that country are endangered in their process of finding and strengthening a cultural respectively religious identity? In which way will life structural orders and primal life cycle be taken care of in such societies and which role can faith communities, those of a majority religion and those of diasporic self-understanding, play in that process?

#### **4. Chances and bearable risks for Faith communities in common Rituals in quickly transforming societies** (Religio-sociological / liturgical frame)

Before I come back to our case asking what kind of model might be most appropriate in this connection, I recall specific experience with various cross-denominational and also multi-religious celebration formats in recent German history. There have been events of nation-wide relevance like that of Reacting on 11/9 in 2001, the Public grief after the Shooting rampage of a student at a Secondary school in Erfurt 2002 killing 16 and afterwards himself, or the Public mourning in Berlin cathedral after Tsunami in 2004.

Now, due to the specific history of Public considerations and Practice of Constitutional legal status of religion in Germany since WW II, the two mainline churches up to now have enjoyed the trust of public communes and national government and all other religious and non-religious communities to organize and manage e.g., an – often nation-wide TV – transmitted celebration taking into account the respective denominational and religious community in a function of a kind in between that of liturgical guest status or multi-religious contribution due to their respective individual concernment, partly without themselves being involved of its setup at all.<sup>14</sup> This interestingly is not the case so much in the other European countries such as Netherlands or France in which the state normally calls for and organizes such events.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Siegfried Becker, „Halwaja. Hamet. Erinnern an die Opfer der Shoah als Beschreibung der zerbrochenen Zeit. *Heimwelt*, No. 41, Weimar/Lahn 2006, 30-33

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Paul Post et al.(2003a), *Disaster Ritual. Explorations of an emerging ritual repertoire*, 252.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Brigitte Benz, following Anne Hähnig, Messen für die Massen, Zeit Online, retr. 24.12.2016, from <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2015-08/gottesdienst-trauerfeier-katastrophe-medien-anneli>; cf. Michael Meyer-Blanck, Liturgie, 2015, 1f., can talk about the Liturgy of the church as moral agent in terms of "the Church's publicly performative form of the Christian religious system" comparable to educational system, theater or media. How much this dominantly appearing practice is still and will still be going on in the future when more right wing groups in German politics due to their negative reaction against the high number of refugees in the country might affect the balance

So in Erfurt Non Christian representatives could very well go with the status of liturgical guests. Yet liturgical scientist in Germany call these formats of public liturgies "risky liturgies"<sup>16</sup>, meaning that in such cases e.g. churches and /or other religious communities are either endangered to be instrumentalized by a Public respectively State authority (e.g. in cases of mourning for victims of military actions) or they might be risking the word and gesture due to their own faith code which could offend people of other convictions. That happened e.g., with the remarkable "17<sup>th</sup> candle" "suddenly present" on the liturgical scene though not agreed upon by the community of the concerned mourners before, dedicated to the murderer in the same ceremony of Erfurt 2002, where 16 candles were lightened for his victims in the memorial service on the stairs of Erfurt Dome in 2002, utmosty embarrassing families of the victims and wide parts of the public.<sup>17</sup> Still, the format of the risky liturgy as such e.g. in Erfurt was thoroughly seen as appropriate in German public thereafter as it managed to express – not only by words, but also by gestures and specific and commonly accepted traditional Ritual competence a common feeling of absolute powerlessness and receptivity to God's grace in the light of Christian faith but also due to the hearts' feelings of all 100 000 people present on the spot. Here one could study that apart from words and positive religious convictions of the 100000, among whom for sure thousands of agnostics and atheists were gathered and could accept this too, the liturgical (liturgy = originally "public" service!) language as a moment of ritual adequacy was carrying then peoples' souls.

A much more clearly type of multi-religious celebration took place in other situations of public mourning, as for instance after a Brown Cole mine-catastrophe in my home church in Borken 1988 claiming 51 mine-workers' lives (13 Turkish Muslims among them), a type of multi-religious celebration having church leaders as well as Imams contributing texts and prayers to a common celebration was the adequate format.

Now coming back to our case study, we again face another situation of different groups concernment: I will further develop my arguments in favor of a School beginners' service combining features of the classical second and third models of common celebrations, now on the basis of the newly recommended model of Ritual companionship, of course combining elements of the classical models 2 and 3.

One argument for the set-up of such an inter-religious model of ritual for life I take from statistics of immigration in nowadays Germany during the foregoing decade: Already five years ago, in 2011, more that 50% of the approx. 4 Mio Muslims living in Germany - in stark difference to the local population - was younger than 20 years; and among the same group at least one third – again in stark difference to the local reference group – was found to be strongly religiously affiliated. In this factor (not to talk about the steadily rising number of young couples of bi-religious descent asking for a wedding ceremony fitting to

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of peaceful togetherness in celebrating and mourning one can hardly foresee today; cf. the cautious prediction of Lutz Friedrichs, *Gebet* 278.. But as a matter of fact, Practical theology and in support of this Systematic theological studies plus Religious studies in our country had to develop strategies for advising churches in such situations since about 15 years, at the latest after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Kristian Fechtner, Thomas Klie, *Riskante Liturgien*, op. cit.; cf. also Bieritz 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Only slowly the embarrassment was calming down, partly also because the German Federal President Johannes Rau had addressed the parents of the murderer by saying: "Whatever a Human being has done, it does not extinct the reality that he a human being." One should never forget that liturgies set reality – of course, without imposing it against peoples' freedom, which yet can be understood like that at the first glance – ; they do not discourse about it; cf. Michael Meyer-Blanck, *Liturgie* 3.



both of them and their families) combined with the real chance for such school beginners' service to get into a follow up contact with Protestant, Roman catholic or Orthodox pupils and their families in Ecumenical togetherness, I see an important argument for such a liturgical format.

Even more than statistics can argue, we find when looking at the individual biographical relevance of the school-beginners ritual as such: All six year old children be them Christian, Muslim or Agnostic due to their foregoing socialization, have come from pre-school educational background. Commonly known so called baby-songs have been practiced, but now childhood is for all of them undergoing a crucial transformation. They have been checked concerning their suitability for school, they all have definitely will leave mother's day to day tutelage. They are not yet fond of the "extra room" many of their parents have established for them "in order to study with highest concentration" because playing would be still the more favorable activity for them. But from today and tomorrow onward all of them have to train arriving in a new society, not only the Turkish or these days in rising number Syrian school beginners, but those from longstanding German descent too. Accordingly, the parents of all these children feel similar speaking silently to themselves and/or to their divine standby: "What have I given to my child to take with her/him? How far can tradition help? Which transformations will have to come until initiation into adult life one day going through circumcision (if not yet done) in the Muslim community or though Confirmation among Christians or Non religious youth ceremony for those brought up in an agnostic or atheistic surrounding?

Now the elders Council of the Protestant pastor in whose shoes we are imagining ourselves has to make a move: Will they give room for a celebration of mixed format combining features of a multi- religious celebration and perhaps some elements of interreligious life ritual?

If they go for a positive decision, they soon will have another challenging question:

Who will be the inviting subject in this case? In the German tradition mentioned and due to legal preconditions this might be the Protestant Church. But that does not exclude at all but rather include a sincere planning for a mutual designing of at least some elements of the liturgies by Christian and Muslim representatives.

Another crucial question will be: What function will the "sacral space" of a church play in this connection? Some will argue that this will be a psychological support in the transitional ritual for the Christian pupils and a certain mental retardant to those from non religious or differently religious descent. But here one could easily find a mode of procedure among the local representatives of school, political commune plus all communities involved, agreeing for instance on an annual taking turns in using public rooms, the mosque and the church in consequent sequence. And in connection with this preparing the age-group sets of the young town population by that for the normality of inter-faith dialogue in practice and theory.

As far as the use of Holy Scriptures of the different religions is concerned, one could use a theme like "Jonah" by collecting aspects of the central stories in different traditions from the different perspectives under the headline of the day: "Where does the journey go...?" After an initial Entrance liturgy presented in the format of multi-religious togetherness by the Local Pastor, the School director and the Imam the pupils might walk around outside the church bypassing three stations of "Where do we come from ...?" Answers: Kindergarten etc., "Where are we now... moving?" Answers: On the threshold of the

fascinating though a bit threatening world of education... and "What do we go for...?" Answers: Becoming knowledgeable and responsible members of our communities in small and the society at large...! the group comes back into the church and after being addressed by two short meditations from Local Pastor and Imam (next year pastor and school director, year thereafter: Imam and school director) there will be a time for prayers in the format of multi-religious celebration, giving voice and regular liturgical space to the pastor in front of the altar and allowing the Imam standing at his place before the seat and adding an Islamic dua- prayer from there.

## **5. Theological critique and appreciation of the model of Ritual companionship** (Theological validation)

At this point we have to enter into probably the most fascinating and challenging question of interreligious dialogue, that of how the actors and participants are getting to perceive the ultimate difference between their faiths and still can find a mode to see themselves together before God. This point of fascination and challenge in one is encountered with ultimate strength and authenticity in the question concerning a common prayer in one language of adoration.

Usually, the one ultimate test case is provoked by various questions such as: *Are those Christians, Muslims and – if they agree so – Agnostic participants directing their concerns to the same divine or other preternatural instances?* Or with the same notorious insistence: *Which role do the concepts of God, as for instance in Christianity and Islam, play when it comes to common participation or refusal of participation in any type of multi-religiously formatted celebration?* Therefore, I finally turn to seek elements of answers on these two questions.

I will start with the second one sketching the systematic- theological foundation and disposition for interreligious considerations on God and concepts of God:

### **5.1 Theology of religions on which basis?**

When listening to views of Church members and Muslims on the road concerning the concept of God one might well find these days what was expressed by school class pupils in comparative religious education when asked whether Christians and Muslims both could go to heaven after death. They just answered: "Of course, they can. It depends on what they do. If a person does good things, be them Muslim or Christian, they will go to heaven, because God likes people doing good. Over there in heaven they might sit at different tables, but it's the one heaven of the one God..."<sup>18</sup> Guided by the religious spirit or religious educational maxims of the day humans tend to conclude after the traditional mode of 'via eminentiae' from wishful models of togetherness, i.e. common understanding and doing good, to earning reconciliatory and peaceful life in eternity. The problem is only that such very understandable and cute vision does not directly meet the reality of interreligious life, neither in German nor in any other societies and cultural settings. This is because the wonderful vision of Mutual understanding" does not just work by fusing different theoretical constructions and categories, it has rather to be received in a struggle for truth and

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<sup>18</sup> Paraphrase of recorded conversation between teacher and 4<sup>th</sup> grade Primary school class in Bavaria, see Elisabeth Naurath, 'Wer früher stirbt, ist länger tot? Was sich christliche und muslimische Kinder nach dem Tod erwarten', in: *In den Himmel kommen nur, die sich auch verstehen. Jahrbuch für Kindertheologie 2009*, 60-70.

understanding in truth in a life-situated dialogue. The reasons are: Christians and Muslims do only slightly talk about the same reality when talking about heaven or salvation, about Holy Scriptures or community in faith – and also not when talking about God.

And all that becomes inevitably clear when people are going to pray. Because then every single participant *recognizes* that his/her *inner expectation of a personal religious encounter with God is actually corresponding to a specific and unsurpassable counterpart from own biographical experience as well as revelation-historically axiomatic event*<sup>19</sup> accompanying his/her religion steadily up to this moment. In this very moment of tasting one's own prayer language most clearly the difference between the possibility of cultural multi-citizenship, but religious home in a mystery of "total perspective" is felt and offers its experiential potential to interreligious theological reflection. This demands instantly that *a theology of religions has to be one of a thoroughly dialogical structure* and must be based on authentic and existential-theologically permeated or academic theologically reflected religious experience from both dialog partners and not just a number of mutual assumptions about one's own and the others deeply existential experience of the divine.

As a matter of fact, the inner expectation of a Christian in this situation follows his/her *Christian theological home code*, recalling the thoroughly reflected account of how God worked 'his' unfathomable and yet mercifully changing works of creation and in historical-incarnational processes culminating in Jesus of Nazareth on behalf of all creatures and is communicating this realistically to him/her in this exact moment as among those whom he has created. Behind such expectation we can see a long history of approval of Christian religious truth: This, the Trinitarian confession of faith, has become what it is only under circumstances of challenges of religious pluralism. That meant at the same time: The primitive church was challenged by the need to confess the specific profile of a life on the basis of God's justification by faith alone, freeing believers from resembling in their ethical efforts and successes a genuine law of life or earning eternal salvation by their own observance of the law. And at the same time they were challenged by avoiding the danger of disqualifying their mother faith in Israel's covenant with God and other contextual religious and philosophies contributing to their new language expressing their new and eschatologically open concept of God.

Trinitarian theology has never been more, but also not less than the implicitly (until 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) and explicitly (since 4<sup>th</sup> cent. AD) guiding language paradigm of Faith confession about the God mentioned above still keeping truth but also needing translation and inculturation step by step in all Christian life settings and cultures of faith. And vice versa it is valid for this theology: "God, as revealed through the Holy Scriptures, neither is the projection of human-religious imagination nor a projection of an abstract philosophical Thinking. God rather is an uncompleted, and only through 'himself' accessible reality of theological confession".<sup>20</sup> Therefore, negatively one could say: This Trinitarian concept of God is neither to be ontologized as a philosophically absolute destination of monotheism nor to be historicized<sup>21</sup> (as the proof of its evidence remains an eschatological

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Michael Weinreich, 'Glauben Juden, Christen und Muslime an denselben Gott? Systematisch-theologische Annäherungen an eine unzugängliche Frage', *Evangelische Theologie* 67/4, 2007, 246-263, esp. 249ff., 259.

<sup>20</sup> Paraphrase of Hilarius of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 2,6 acc. to Donald Wood, David A. Gilland, *Christliche Gotteslehre in der Welt der Religionen*, 46-47 (transl. by author).

<sup>21</sup> Reason: the proof of its evidence remains an eschatological approximation; cf. Insa Meyer, 'Monotheismus, Christentum und Gewalt. Das Christentum als Paradigma für die Überwindung der Gewalt in der Religion', *Evangelische Theologie* 67/4, 2007, 263-276, 274.

approximation only!) as a state of power to be defended or represented by human position of understanding, ethical or social power.

After all, we are well advised to further explore and steadily value the Trinitarian concept of God as a concept of Christian Faith confession and at the same time a concept open to appreciate God's self-revelation to adherents of other faiths.

Though it is not possible for me for the fundamental reason of lack of personal access<sup>22</sup> as well as due to shortage of time and space today to give a concise reflection on *Islamic understanding of God*, at least I want to reflect on *some of its features* and focus on those that have been seen *in certain analogy in both religions*. This all in order to help both sides open for a process of better mutual understanding of each other's concept of God:

(a) One is the resume, often come to by comparative theologians these days, that in both religions "God is thought of / perceived as a personally life-ward being that wants to step into relationship and invites human by 'his' juridical guidance respectively through 'his' presence in the Holy Spirit to do 'his' good will...".<sup>23</sup>

Besides that (b) in both religions God is named multifariously indicating that there are manifold life experiences hinting humans at God and making life appearing as a bridge to God's self-revelation.

Again, (c) in both religions' history of philosophical reflection on the background of their different ways of acculturation to Greek philosophy one could state that there are analogous lines of scholastic traditions working in both religions theological theories, namely between a rationalistic equation of God with a transcendental principle in the schools of Mu'tazila and Thomist Natural theology on the line of philosophical realism and again between the voluntaristic equations of God with a powerful and merciful revealer in the schools of the Asharites and Duns Scotus Theology of Grace on the line of philosophical nominalism.

Yet, to state the above three items cannot lead us to talk about a strong convergence of theological concepts in Islam and Christianity. Actually, one must still see how different the basic hermeneutical concepts of "theology" are in both religions, in Christianity dealing with the whole process of all Believers' seeking understanding of their faith in theory and practice and in Islam traditionally focusing on the Juridical schools' different exegesis of the Quran.

Besides that, compared to building dialog just on the traditional type of rational and academic dialog of scholars I find it very promising to widen the criteria of assessing perception of God from comparing "God theories" on both sides to "modes of perceiving or experiencing God"<sup>24</sup>. In this connection in Germany we value recent writings of Islamic studies, especially in Western European contexts, that highlight unique characteristics of each religion in order to create a lively and authentic dialog instead of a lame dialog on the

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<sup>22</sup> To this and a thorough critical reflection of „one God“ in different theologies of different religions cf. Weinreich, op. cit., 259f.

<sup>23</sup> Klaus von Stosch, „Gott im Islam“, in: M. Mühlhng(ed.), *Gott und Götter in den Weltreligionen. Christentum, Judentum, Islam, Hinduismus, Konfuzianismus, Buddhismus*. Grundwissen Christentum 5, Göttingen 2014, 103-142, 139. This can be supported by the observations of Weinreich, op.cit., 262, that adherents of both religions humbly commit themselves to God's merciful guidance. Yet, there are positions like that of the Ankaran school who are not focusing on a personal image of God.

<sup>24</sup> Similar ideas one can find with the German Systematic theologian Hans-Martin Barth in his Protestant Dogmatics in Interreligious contexts, Hans-Martin Barth. *Dogmatik*, 243-248. 296-304.

basis of assumed, but not real convergences. Here one could name the school of Islamic scholars who build on the esthetic uniqueness of God's word and self expression through revelatory work of Quran recitations.<sup>25</sup>

## **5.2 "Praying to the same God...?"**

After this basic reflection I tend to answer this question as follows: Depending on what we define by "praying to", we cannot give an abstract positive or negative answer here. For sure etymological solutions will not help too like that saying Muslims pray to Allah while Christians pray to God, because the generic name of God in Islam "Allah" is not specific for Islam at all as well as "God" is not uniquely a Christian naming of God. Allah has been the pre Islamic name in Arabic cultures as well as being the name of God for Arabic speaking Christians until this day.

So I would say: As much as members of both religions expect One God to take care of all creation be alive they can see each other existing and in some situation standing before the one God. But as much as they have received completely different personal revelations and by that experienced God in very different ways their contradicting concepts of God do not allow them to speak common prayers in a prayer adequate intimately spiritual language.

## **6. Possible liturgical elements of the celebration (Provisional conclusion)**

In order to mutually learn to understand and respect each other's specific and unique traditions of prayer and divine concepts behind, it could be quite attractive to let the different representatives of religions present in the church during the School beginners' service in our German town church in a outgoing section of multi-religious prayer briefly introduce the different meanings of ritual prayer resp. liturgical psalm prayer in Islam and Christianity on the one and of free prayer in intercessions in both religions on the other hand.

Making use of the Jonah- resp. Yunus- stories could be an exemplary field of learning about one's life under God's promise and command in both religions and also in a life without specific religious adherence. Going through steps of meditation as said above under the guiding questions of

(A) "What is my destination in life? What have I been given as a treasure in my family to make use of?" to the next

(B) "What is threatening me? What makes me insecure and like to run away from into the opposite direction of my destination?" to the third one of

(C) "How can we find back on our way in whatever situations we have come...?"

in the main section of the service could be followed by a period of conclusive praying and listening to prayers. The double purpose of this final section would be

(1) to find oneself again in a prayer language familiar with when hearing the representative of one's own faith reciting a pre-formulated Psalm resp. ritual prayer in Relation to the

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<sup>25</sup> Cf . Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*, München 2015, 27.173.217 passim.

story of Jonah / Yunus. This could be a passage from Jonah 2 or a Psalm-passage like Psalm 23 fitting into the situation of Jonah according to Jonah ch. 2 and on the Islamic side a recitation of Sr. 21 interpreting the Islamic head confession as the turning point of prophetic repentance; but also

(2) to learn listening to the other faith's prayer tradition without being able to fall in and without being urged to do so.

Even an intercessional prayer from both traditions – presented by both representatives in German – should not try to alleviate or nullify the minimum liturgical differences characteristic for the two faith, but rather stand by them, e.g. in the different ways of addressing God or closing the prayer. But after the foregoing pre-shaped liturgical resp. ritual prayer it would sound quite a bit more understandable showing to the children that common concerns and human needs are carried before God before whom both communities stand together.

At least this experience of finding familiar language and tone before God as well as investigating by oneself what really makes one feel at home within God's presence and on what this depends and at the same time considering the neighbor faith to engage in its own intimate relationship with God which myself I cannot find myself in, but I can respect it as authentic and serious sign of adoration and feel its side effects of good will against oneself makes this experience of ritual companionship a step to common religious friendship in the expectation of a more close relationship under God's future guidance for both.