Interreligious Dialogue and the Development of a Transreligious Identity
A Correspondence

Katharina von Kellenbach & Manuela Kalsky

February 29, 2008

Dear Manuela,

When I entered interreligious dialogue as a student of Protestant theology, the theoretical framework and theological expectations were clear: the solidly trained and identified Christian would reach out, engage in conversation and learn about the different practices, traditions and beliefs of the religious other—in my case those ‘others’ were Jews. Missionary efforts were declared anathema, nobody was to be converted and each side was supposed to maintain their religious distinctiveness as Jews and Christians. True, the Christian engaged in such dialogue in anticipation of having her Christian anti-Judaism challenged. She was prepared to amend her anti-Jewish biblical hermeneutics, to suffer the loss of theological heroes and teachers over their anti-Semitic attitudes, and to struggle with Christology and the trinity. But dialogue was supposed to deepen one’s original religious identification. It was neither supposed to lead to conversion nor to syncretism and mishmash, as the anglicised Yiddish would put it.

But a dream, early in my career in interreligious dialogue during the mid-eighties, alerted me to the fact that my interreligious practice was beginning to affect deeper and unconscious levels. It was a dream that made no sense in Christian symbolic and ritual language and could only be interpreted within a Jewish framework. I had been invited to my first Orthodox Jewish Passover in Allentown, PA. I was nervous and dreamt during the preceding night that I arrived at the door of my friend with a large suitcase. She became suspicious and told me that she had just cleaned her house of all hametz (no yeast may remain in the house, and all bread, noodles, flour, etc has to be removed) and that she wanted to make sure that I had nothing in my suitcase that would break the laws of Passover. When I opened the suitcase, it contained cakes and loaves of bread. The crumbs were falling all over the threshold of her house. This dream not only expressed my fears of breaking Passover laws, but more significantly, it re-enacted a ritual of Rosh HaShana. During the Jewish New Year, observant Jews put breadcrumbs in their pockets and walk to a moving stream. There the breadcrumbs symbolizing one’s sins and trespasses are thrown into the water in preparation for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. I had participated in such a Rosh HaShana observance the fall before and had been moved by this ritual of cleansing and renewal. The dream fused these two rituals and I realized for the first time that I would have to pursue my family’s history during National Socialism if I wanted to enter the houses of my Jewish dialogue partners without guilty baggage. My dream of being forced to open a suitcase full of breadcrumbs on the threshold of a house prepared for Passover proved to be prophetic of my later research in German family history during National Socialism.¹ But I am telling this story to show how deeply Jewish ritual symbolism had ingrained itself into my unconscious. This

dream was the beginning of a slow border crossing between the Jewish and Christian religious traditions.

My story is not exceptional. A good number in my cohort of Protestant theologians who started on the path of Jewish-Christian dialogue have since converted to Judaism—an option that I have contemplated occasionally and rejected (so far). Instead a third way suggested itself between the either/or of conversion: the go-between, Grenzgänger, the smuggler who makes a living on the border and maintains homes in two places. Smugglers move goods across borders and are considered criminals in the eyes of those charged with protecting the integrity of the community. Because they subvert religious (national) boundaries they pose a threat to interreligious dialogue.

What may interreligious dialogue mean in a secular world where the boundaries between religious communities have become porous and fluid as a matter of course? For many, religious identity and communal identification have become matters of choice and conflict. We experience loyalty and spiritual connection not only with our religious families of origin but also with new friends in the global marketplace of religious and philosophical traditions, as well as social and political movements. Jews celebrate Christmas and Christians celebrate Passover, communities are led by Jewish-Christian pastors and Christian-Jewish rabbis, Jews practice Buddhism and Christians identify as Wiccans. The women’s movement has become a spiritual home for many of us, and these ties prove often stronger than the bonds with our respective faith communities. The keepers of orthodox doctrine and catholic consistency have sometimes more in common with each other than with their respective wayward flocks. Can the smuggler legitimately represent the community in dialogue?

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April 28, 2008

Dear Katharina

My first interreligious encounter also took place in the context of Christian-Jewish dialogue. During my theological studies I made the move from Marburg to Amsterdam, where subjects were taught at the university that did not exist yet in the early 1980s in Germany: women’s studies and liberation theology. Also I had heard that there was a rabbi in Hilversum at the Folkertsma Foundation called Yehuda Aschkenasy, who was a survivor of the Shoah and offered seminars on Judaism for German students. I did not yet know that these seminars would influence my theological approach so much. They were confrontational, existential encounters and instructive moments in which I was more or less forced to engage with my identity as a German. No escape was possible: I was living in a country that had been invaded by Nazi-Germany and tangled up in a war, and before me stood a rabbi who had survived Auschwitz and made it his aim in life to work with young Germans so that it would never happen again.


In the Netherlands I was confronted with the prevailing anti-German mood: my car with its German license plates repeatedly received mysterious dents; my neighbor, who had fought in the Princess Irene Brigade against the ‘Moffen’ (a disparaging Dutch term for Germans), regularly showed me the weapons collection that he preserved in his apartment two floors down. He would draw a knife from its sheath and would only reinsert it when he had made a small cut in his arm and it was sticky with blood. I avoided inviting my parents to visit as I was afraid of what would happen if my neighbor spoke to my father, who was about the same age, on the stairs.

These experiences and encounters caused me to feel more and more personally concerned and conscious of sharing responsibility of removing anti-Judaism from Christian theology. Converting to Judaism was not something I thought of, though, unlike you. The challenge in working on Judaism was for me more at the intellectual and theological level and was reflected in my dissertation on the re-vision of Christology from a feminist theological angle.4

Christian identity
The analysis of anti-Judaism in Christian theology brought me to the insight that Christian identity had to emerge in relation to the ‘other’ and no longer by contrast. The longer I worked on Christology, the clear it became to me that it was not enough to interpret Jesus in the context of Judaism to escape anti-Judaism in Christian theology. I owe a lot to the feminist theological work of Rosemary Radford Ruethers. She set me on the track of understanding that Christian anti-Judaism had something to do with finding Christian identity.5 In order to be authentically Christian, one’s own yearnings for salvation must lead back to Jesus. And so it happened that in the 20th century Jesus of Nazareth became the Arian, the Communist, the feminist, the black liberator, etc. People were not looking for inspiration for a contemporary Christian identity in the Jesus stories - they wanted to seek and find legitimization for their hopes for salvation in the modern age. After all, these values could only be claimed as Christian values if Jesus personified them too. This process of defining Christian identity occurs then – and now –at the expense of Judaism and other religions that are unwilling to accept the uniqueness and novelty of God’s revelation in Jesus as the redeemer of the whole of humanity.

This Christianity claim to superiority and this hierarchical and dualistic notion of Christian identity was the object of my critique, and it still is. Instead of such a closed concept of identity, I am looking for a relational identity that is fundamentally open to the wisdom of other religions and wants to learn from them without setting itself anxiously apart from ‘the others.’

Community and individual
You have chosen for yourself the position of smuggler, the one who slips through the holes in the barbed wire of religious traditions and thus fosters the ‘exchange of religious goods and values’. The smuggler undermines the separation between religious traditions and gradually loosens the barriers between religious communities that become porous and fluid. And finally, you ask the whether only the guardians of orthodoxy and unity have the right to speak on behalf of the community or also those smugglers who engage in mixing up the different religions into a mishmash.

Before I expand on the question of the relationship between unity and diversity in my next letter, and the origin of a transreligious identity, I would like to ask you a question, which arises from your query into who has the right to speak as representative of a certain community. Do you think that in the future we will be able to assume the existence of religious communities at all, in a culture that has become so individualistic? Do you consider participation in a community a precondition for the practice of a religion or can one be a Christian or a Jew religious without being an active member of a religious community? The situation in the Netherlands seems to be moving in this direction.

Although religiosity is ‘booming business’ in the Netherlands, the number of church members is constantly declining. People are turning their backs on the church as an institution. Incidentally, this also applies to political parties, associations, trade unions etc. Many young people have no idea what Christianity is actually all about. While 60 percent of Dutch people still claim to be faithful, according to the surveys, only 4 out of 10 mean a traditional faith. The rest are in the category of ‘unbound spirituality’. They are far from being smugglers, who secretly draw on two traditions. For some time now they have been quite openly patching together their own religion from the wisdom sayings of differing traditions. 75 percent of Dutch people are convinced that this is the way forward for religion in the future.\(^6\) To be honest, I think that when smugglers speak they no longer do so in the name of a whole gang of smugglers but as individuals who have picked out wisdom sayings from the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Voodoo religion that suit their lives. They do not represent a group but only themselves, or perhaps two or three others. They are no longer part of a religious community in the classical sense. How does this development fit with your question of whether the smuggler can legitimately represent the whole community? I look forward to your reply.

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June 11, 2008

Dear Manuela,

You are correct to point out that the metaphor of the smuggler depends upon the continued existence of borders and a sense of communal identity. And you are also right to note that membership in religious communities is waning in Europe where citizens experience themselves primarily as individuals without strong commitments to or sense of obligation towards particular religious communities. In secular societies, where individuals feel empowered to pick and choose religious wisdom from different traditions, the keepers of orthodox boundaries lose authority and smugglers become obsolete. But I am not convinced that we (already) live in such an open and borderless world in which individuals may think, pray and move freely. I want to provide two examples why I think that the subversive border crossing of smugglers will remain a relevant metaphor.

On the one hand, our borders have shifted from religious institutions to the secular realm of nation states. The image of the smuggler hails not accidentally from the world of nation states which has absorbed the desire for community and (almost) replaced religious markers of identity.

This is especially true for Europe. The United States is different because religious communities continue to flourish despite (and because of) the individualism of the modern capitalist economy. But in both the European and American settings, religion has been relegated to the private sphere of personal sentiments. The public political realm of communal affairs is shaped primarily by secular, national, liberal and rational discourses. This arrangement is currently being tested by the political awakening of evangelical Christianity under George W. Bush and Republican candidate for Vice President Sarah Palin. The Republican ticket of 2008 strikes fear in the hearts of many liberals committed to religious freedom and interreligious exploration because evangelical Christians act as a unified force, and hence politically, in order to challenge the political and legal foundations of the state. They refuse to accept the marginalization of religion to the private, individual realm and reclaim public, political relevance. Political Islam poses a similar threat to the established border between ‘state and church,’ the secular world of politics and the private world of individual spirituality.

My sense is that your description of personal interreligious exploration depends upon the safety of borders that are currently threatened by Evangelical Christianity in the US and political Islam in Europe. The Dutch may pick and choose nuggets of religious wisdom from various religious traditions. But they also feel threatened by Muslim representatives who demand political representation and social equality. European Islam is perceived as a threat to the secular political foundations of Europe. The current wave of Islamophobia sweeping Europe is a testament to the frantic search to secure the borders of communal identity. Suddenly the Christian roots of Europe have become relevant in public political discourse. I am less convinced than you that we are on the verge of dispensing with boundaries of communal identity. While I share your vision of a world of free religious agents, I am weary of the threats to individual spiritual exploration. In the meantime, it seems to me, we will continue to need smugglers who subvert borders in order to move people, goods, ideas and practices across the frontiers that divide us.

I have one ‘gang’ of subversive interreligious smugglers in mind. Feminist theologians and activists are often maligned as outsiders and carriers of external notions, suspected of smuggling foreign ideas into a pure and pristine patriarchal tradition. Christian feminists were considered handmaidens of secular enlightenment and revolutionary philosophies. Jewish feminists were accused of assimilating into mainstream culture and Muslim feminists are considered carriers of Western colonialist ideologies. The patriarchal keepers of orthodoxy perceive the radical vision idea of women’s religious agency and human subjectivity as an external threat to tradition and community cohesion. And they are right to fear global feminist networks that support women across religious differences. There is an intrinsic interreligious component to the world wide sweep of feminism: despite local differences, women face similar issues in each religious patriarchal tradition: rights of access to religious education, to leadership roles and positions of authority; hermeneutics and the reinterpretation of sacred texts, marital law and sexual ethics, etc. Feminists cross religious borders routinely, both individually and in the name of a ‘smuggler’s gang,’ if you will.

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June 11, 2008

Dear Katharina,

Probably Europe is far less secular than was long thought. The present revival of religion comes as a real shock to many European ‘enlightenment fundamentalists’. Above all, because it makes it
clear that the reigning theory of secularization theory according to which the greater a country’s affluence, the less the citizens feel the need for religion, is a myth. This theory has never quite applied to the United States – as you have already indicated: ‘America is rich and religious.’ In Europe this prediction was widely believed to be true, and the consistent decline in church membership seemed to confirm it. Now, though, sociological studies show that there is a religious upswing worldwide, and even Europe does not merely represent a little secular island in a huge religious ocean but is experiencing its own religious revival. In the midst of this, a sense of helplessness is spreading in the Netherlands – one of the most secular countries in Europe – and a desperate quest for its own identity is growing.

With trepidation one observes Muslim solidarity and sense of ‘we,’ feared because of September 11, 2001 and subsequent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists, and one realizes that one has no comparable sense of common identity to counter it. What do we actually believe in, and are we actually still proud of our own country? In the demarcation from others – above all from Islam – there has been a recurrence of national feeling, a demand for a well-defined identity, pride in the achievements of Dutch history, which are then also promptly laid down in a cultural canon that children are supposed to learn at school. National pride is ‘in.’ But this forgets often that many Dutch people’s histories originated elsewhere. They have their roots in Turkey, Greece, China, North and South America, Asia, Africa etc. and their cultural and religious legacy will help to determine the future of the Netherlands. There are Asian, African and oriental-looking young women and men who, when they open their mouth, have an unmistakable downtown Amsterdam accent, as though their ancestors had never lived anywhere else than in Jordan, the heart of Amsterdam. They are migrant children who have grown up biculturally and are now in the second or third generation, bearers of a hybrid identity who, if they mix with a lover from another culture, are the hope of a cosmopolitan and cosmo-religious future.

This is no longer strictly a matter of interreligious dialogue, in which representatives of the different religions exchange commonalities and differences in their understanding of Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed and Jesus. Divergent cultures and religions flow together in one and the same person. This is not a matter of an inter-subjective dialogue, but of inner-subjective loyalties towards several cultures and religious traditions, which are directly linked in the self and their parents, siblings or life partners. Such people personify multiple religious and cultural identities.

I have referred to this because I recently came across a book with interviews, entitled *Let’s make love – 27 impossible love relationships*. It contains reports by bicultural and bireligious couples about problems and opportunities of multicultural and multireligious relationships. The story of Susan und Yahya stayed with me for a long time. She is a Danish Jew and he is a Muslim from Morocco. They met at a pantomime training course in Amsterdam. Like many other couples who experience what looks like an ‘impossible love,’ Susan and Yahya experienced hostilities from the community – their relatives, friends and acquaintances – that made things hard for them. They do not just have to deal with personal differences but are forced to take on the burden of the entire political situation in the Middle East. They are not willing to give up their love because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however, and with the help of their pantomimes, which they perform with and for children, they strive to eliminate stereotypes that typecast the enemy. They have given their own daughter an Yiddish-Arab name: Blume/Yamina. They consider her blossoming a sign of hope in the midst of a hopeless war and intend to raise their child biculturally and bireligiously in order to give her the best of both traditions. A contribution to peace between the peoples, under the slogan: the *Julsims* are coming!
While this initiative is primarily an individual action, it is highly political. To be honest, I have always held out greater hopes to small personal encounters than to big, top-level interreligious conferences. As you notice, I am less negative about ‘individualization’ in Europe than you are. I get the impression from your letter that you see the development that many Europeans nowadays determine the measure and sources of their religious connection themselves as a kind of religious ‘fast food’, a superficial consumerism of religious values, which you reject. I am less critical of this trend, or at least more ambivalent about it, as it seems to me to be a logical consequence of our late-modern European society. People are forced to make choices, not only in the sphere of economics but also in other areas. Conventions are can no longer relied on and life has become very flexible, with all the advantages and disadvantages that this entails.

Under the impact of secularization, but above all of individualization, Europe has undergone a transformation of religious identity, and the consequences are now particularly visible, thanks to globalization and the accompanying migration. Not only the churches as institutions are under pressure, also political parties, trade unions and other associations are losing members. Europeans have become responsible citizens and will no longer be told what, or how, they are to believe. Feminism has made a crucial contribution to the dissolution of these dogmatic truths. This also applies to the individualization that has made it possible for women to withdraw from group pressure of a patriarchally structured society and religion, and to decide for themselves how they want to live and what they want to believe. The personal is political – this experience of women has become the hermeneutic key to a new theology of women’s liberation! Certainly the consistent implementation of these demands of the (religious) women’s movement of the 1960s helped to make many women turn their backs on institutionalized religion.

Europe today faces the challenge of an incisive paradigm shift, from thinking in unity to a mindset of diversity. If the citizens of Europe are not ready to offer a home to the people of other cultures and religions who come to Europe as migrants, there is a danger that Europe will be torn apart in the tussle for cultural and religious differences. The nostalgic attempts to recreate a long-gone European culture of nation states, based on unity of language, territory and religion, must be replaced with a culture made up of multiple identities in all areas of life.

I completely agree with you: we must intensify relations with one another, forge links where we are today still fearful and avoid one another. Our latest research project at the Dominican Study Centre for Theology and Society is a multimedia, interreligious website, intended to promote religious flexibility: www.reliflex.nl. Before I tell you all about the website though, I would like to hear whether you agree that we should give more attention to the bireligious experiences of the second generation of migrants, and less to the theoretical interfaith dialogue between representatives of different religious schools of thought? I have the impression that the concept of ‘interreligious dialogue’ is no longer suited to expressing what we need in the 21st century and what I have tried to express in the concept of paradigm shift - from unity to diversity in our mindset.

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June 24, 2008

Dear Manuela,

I agree completely with you that the definition of interreligious dialogue ought to begin with those who struggle to create a home between idealized notions of national, religious and cultural unity. Maybe it would be helpful to spell out our scepticism of interreligious dialogue and clarify our misgivings. The following description may be an unfair exaggeration but it exemplifies what I see as the limitations of traditional conceptions of interreligious dialogue. Typically, interreligious dialogue involves representatives of religious institutions (churches, synagogue, mosques, temples) who initiate and facilitate meetings in which the respective theological traditions are explained in formal settings, such as dialogue groups or conferences. The invited experts are authorized to speak on behalf of their communities and present the dogmatic ‘high-tradition’ of their faiths. Topics revolve around central dogmatic tenets such as theology, authority and interpretation of scripture, prayer and festivals, or religious law and ethics. Those who attend such panels, conferences, or local dialogue groups receive basic knowledge and learn to respect the authenticity and distinct nature of another religious tradition. Dialogue often relies on religious dignitaries who are predominantly male and such dialogues invariably reproduce patriarchal conventions. The theory of dialogue believes that increased knowledge of the other creates greater tolerance and appreciation of religious difference.

Such theories of dialogue fail to capture the much more chaotic conversations among the ordinary multitudes, especially migrants who do not belong to the educated elite and are not among sanctioned religious dignitaries. Their encounters demand an expanded, religiously pluralistic theory because they involve different agents, settings and contents. ‘Who’ the experts are, ‘how’ religious difference will be negotiated and ‘what’ constitutes the primary items on the agenda will differ substantially. In a second step, we must ask whether such interreligious practices can still be called dialogue or should be given a different name altogether.

The ‘Who’—Subjects of Dialogue
Global migrants must cultivate some level of inter-cultural and interreligious competency and flexibility. They are engaged in dialogue on an existential level and their identity is transformed by their intimate negotiations of interreligious conflicts. They interact daily and form deep and lasting relationships in the context of love or work across cultural and religious differences. Such hybrid, interreligious existence is deeply challenging. But their presence in the midst of majority cultures also compels changes among their ‘hosts’ as they develop strategies to adjust, co-exist and accept neighbors, lovers and co-workers. Are such interreligious survival strategies developed by women and other ordinary folk included in our definitions of interreligious dialogue? In what ways do such ‘dialogues’ differ compared to those among religious functionaries?

The ‘How’—The Settings of Dialogue
Dialogue guidelines call for clear boundaries and warn against two main dangers: first, no missionary attempts and efforts to convert the partner by ‘proving’ the superior truth of one particular religious path. The principles of dialogue repudiate evangelism and condemn the history of ‘disputations’ that intended to force the ‘other’ to concede defeat and to embrace the truth of Christianity. Second, dialogue warns against the dangers of ‘syncretism’ and any
“illegitimate mingling of different religious elements.” Such ‘mixing’ of faiths is perceived as a dilution and reaching for the lowest common denominator. Syncretism, so the argument, compromises the authenticity of religious traditions and fails to do justice to either party. By definition, dialogue partners agree to respect the integrity of each religious system and commit to forgo missionary ambitions and syncretism. But the interreligious reality of migrants includes conversion and syncretism. People fall in love and convert in order to marry—or they maintain the religious commitments of their families of origin and negotiate competing religious festival calendars and the religious education of their children. By definition they fall outside the boundaries of dialogue, because they have converted and/or mixed and matched religious obligations to rival communities—and yet they, more than anyone else, mediate conflicting religious truth claims and moral systems. How must the definition of dialogue change in order to support and critically accompany the syncretistic and religiously mobile in times of economic globalization?

The ‘What’—Content of Dialogue
The intermarried Jewish-Muslim couple you mentioned is forced to negotiate competing loyalties and suspicions of their families and communities. As a couple, they are also required to make daily decisions about food (luckily, halal meat is considered kosher), sex (menstrual taboos and Ramadan restrictions, etc), which particular festivals to observe during the liturgical year and the basic education of their daughter. A committed interreligious relationship requires extraordinary religious knowledge. Most religious institutions condemn interreligious relationships. They demand conversion and threaten excommunication for those who fail to submit to one religious regiment. The intermarried tend to be abandoned by their respective religious communities and often drop out of religion altogether.

Sometimes new communities emerge. For instance, a group of intermarried Jewish-Christian families has regularly observed the Passover Seder at my house for years. None of the intermarried couples felt competent and knowledgeable enough to host a Passover Seder. As resident religious expert, my home seemed the perfect neutral space for this celebration despite my Christian pedigree. To my children, Passover has become an expected and integral part of their liturgical year, although they are baptized and confirmed Lutherans. Such syncretism is anathema to purists of interreligious dialogue. Yet, the interreligious reality of love and work prepared the way for this community. Dialogue nurtures its spiritual life as this intermarried band of smugglers prepares the house, distributes cooking tasks, reads the Seder and observes the laws of remembrance of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt.

For religious hybrids ‘dialogue’ should provide a reflective space where interreligious relationships and practices can be critically examined. Such dialogue moves beyond respect for distinct and authentic religious traditions and provides critical tools for people engaged in processes of integration and acculturation. Individuals assimilate, mix and match, or switch

8 (http://www.ciid.ca/Articles/Baker_1.pdf, June 24, 2008)
9 http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/77glines-e.html (June 24, 2008)
10 Cf the autobiography of Lauren Winner, who first converts to Orthodox Judaism, following the upbringing in her Jewish father’s tradition, and subsequently to evangelical Anglican Christianity in the tradition of her mother’s Southern family. Along the way, she develops a strong attachment to both religions and negotiates disappointments and hostilities from both communities. Lauren F. Winner, Girl Meets God, (Chapel Hill, Algonquin Book, 2002).
primary religious allegiances. Syncretism and religious mobility are not the enemy. Intolerance, fanaticism and oppression are. As economic and political globalization proceeds, ever greater numbers of people will move, acculturate and experiment with religious paths into which they were not born.

And there will be backlash! Individual mobility and mass migration (e.g. the Turkish Muslim minority in Germany or the Arab Muslim community in France) break up traditional institutions and undermine established communities. Such mobility creates instability and insecurity. While some welcome and benefit from the introduction of diversity and flexibility, others retrench and long for clear boundaries and structures. We witness similar phenomena in the renewal of nationalist secularism among indigenous European (post-)Christians and the rise of religious-ethnic fundamentalism among European Muslims.

Better education helps during unsteady times of transition. Basic instruction about the history and beliefs of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism belongs into every school and university curriculum (it is currently neither!). But the communication of knowledge is not be the primary task of dialogue. Its principal task consists of the establishment of trusting relationships that serve to negotiate conflicts peacefully. The conflicts we are currently witnessing in Europe revolve not around issues of theology, scripture or religious observance, but rather around sex and gender, dress and religious architecture, social justice and violence, education and immigrant welfare. These are not coincidentally the primary conflicts that every intermarried couple has to solve. Such decisions about ‘right practice’ (orthopraxis) are the daily bread of migrants who negotiate different sets of cultural expectations and religious loyalties. You correctly referred to them not as ‘inter-subjective’ but ‘inner-subjective’ dialogues. Interreligious dialogue should create the space to examine and reflect on the daily negotiations of interreligious life.

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September 1, 2008

Dear Katharina,

Your thoughts about the Who, What and How sum things up again: interreligious dialogue has entered a new phase and it is time to check on the shelf-life of the concept and related content and ask: where do we go from here?¹¹

1) Interreligious
Can we really still speak of ‘interreligious’ dialogue?
Religious identities are becoming hybrid or they already are, and that does not apply only to migrants. The established citizens of Europe are developing multiple religious identities in everyday life through their encounters with people of other religions and through the information stream in the ‘worldwide web’. These identities no longer conform to the law of purity and unity. Borders are blurring and identities are becoming fluid. The insight of post-colonial thinkers that there is always another in the other has made clear that the dualist separation between rulers and ruled, colonizers and colonized, is an over-simplified analysis of the real power relations. The

role we play in life is far from clear.\textsuperscript{12} This observation of multilayering also applies in the religious sphere. Religions too are not clearly defined entities, to be tidily sorted into clearly defined categories. All religious traditions are products of intercultural and interreligious processes, according to Michael von Brück, a scholar of religious studies, and I agree with him. As soon as there are alternatives to the cultural rules and to basic values of a society, new identities are constructed.\textsuperscript{13} The purity of a truth or doctrine of faith yields to the mixing of different religious truths, which are generally rejected as syncretism in official theological and ecclesiastical quarters.\textsuperscript{14} However, when a normative tradition is no longer the rule, but rather a religious \textit{bricolage} constructed out of the elements of different religious traditions, then the concept of interreligious dialogue is no longer apt.

2) Dialogue
Is dialogue still the right expression for what should happen in the encounter of people with differing religious and cultural backgrounds? I would like to maintain that the relation between people of different religious and non-religious views of life should be one of dialogical understanding. Dialogue is not to be equated with discussion, yet the term strongly privilege a verbal relationship with others. Yet the encounter should not primarily be about discussion of one’s own religious convictions and the central truths of a certain normative tradition, but rather about the establishment of mutual trust and understanding. In my view, the term points too strongly to the cognitive aspect of encounter and too little to common action, the realization of small, specific projects together. How do we create a common ‘we’ in our immediate environment? A ‘we’ that does not immediately produce a ‘they’ by excluding others; a new ‘we’ that makes cultural and religious differences fruitful and enables a more holistic view of what ‘the good life for all’ means; a ‘we’ in which we learn to see with the eyes of the others and are thus in a position to expand our own limited view by the perspective of the other in personal relationships.
In other words: fruitful intercultural and interreligious interaction begins not with one’s own– in our case – Christian-dogmatic beliefs, but with everyday life and the ethical action grounded therein. This attitude is, moreover, also quite possible at meetings of official representatives of respective religions, as I showed on the example of Rita Gross and Paul Knitter in my article ‘Embracing Diversity’.\textsuperscript{15} Knowledge about the different religions and the cooperation on projects gives rise to friendships, which are important pillars of interreligious encounter and nourish theological reflection. First comes practical encounter and confidence-building and then theoretical theological reflection. This methodological path, that was paved in the 1970s by liberation theologians who placed praxis before theory, appears to be the right one, i.e. setting small goals and expressing them in terms of the participants’ everyday life – this is not an argument for navel-gazing though. The same rule applies for transreligious encounter: Act locally, think globally.

\textsuperscript{15} M. Kalsky, Embracing Diversity, 226-228. Also on this topic see: H. Egnell, Other Voices. A Study of Christian Feminist Approaches to Religious Plurality East and West, Studia Missionalia Svecana, Uppsala 2006.
The good life for all

Theoretically we agree: the hermeneutical and epistemological place for what is important in interreligious dialogue lies in the life and faith experiences of people who live and survive in the daily life of a multicultural and multireligious society. But who are they, in fact? Migrants and their hosts, you will say, and, in principle, I agree with you. But being a migrant is not the same as being poor and oppressed, just as being a host is not the same as being affluent and privileged. People can no longer easily be divided into groups giving a clear indication of their aspirations and their standard of living. The dividing line between people often runs not between the different religions or between atheists, agnostics and religious people, but between people who are willing to work for the ‘the good life for all’, including their own, and people who exclusively focus on their own well-being. This means that everyone who lives in a particular suburb or village, rich and poor, male and female, Hindu and Muslim, hetero and homo will be invited to a communal meal. Without establishing a bond between all the people living there it will not prove possible for the “less powerful in the land” to flourish. Here too I think that we must transform the paradigm shift from an ‘either-or’ to a ‘both-and’ approach. Spiritual poverty can kill just as material poverty does. Both must be combated. And that is why Sophia – the personification of divine wisdom in the Hebrew Bible – invites everyone to the table:

“Come, eat the bread I give you, drink the wine I have mixed! Leave your foolish ways, and live. Walk in the way of understanding.” (Proverbs 9:1-6).