Globethics Repository



Historical Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Benad, Matthias
Publisher	Frankfurt University
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-09 13:12:43
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/191131

Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main
ISSN 1434-5935 - © E.Weber

No. 12b (1998)

Historical Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue

"....in no other than the human form is it possible for beings to experience and become acquainted with my real existence."

By

Matthias Benad

That God has to become man in order to reveal the being of God to mankind is a belief not only held by Christianity. In Bhagavata Purana, one of the holy scriptures of Hinduism, God Vishnu speaks the sentence quoted above when he is incarnated as Krishna. In a world getting ever smaller, awareness of other religions gains more and more importance. It is my purpose to show what contribution the theological field I represent, ecclesiastical history or historical theology,[1] may make towards getting to know other religions and seeking dialogue with them. I will use the worship of Krishna in the following text to exemplify my propositions.[2]

My explanations are set out in five parts: (I) two traditions of how God became man; (II) the problem and purpose of inter-religious encounter; (III) historical theology as history; (IV) historical theology as theology; (V) thoughts about dialogue with other religions as an encounter between two things of comparable significance.

I.

The tradition of Jesus´ birth is well-known in our culture. I want to retell the story of Krishna´s birth in outline so as to make a comparison possible. For many Vaishnavas, the worshippers of God Vishnu, Mathura is what Bethlehem is in the Christian tradition. The city is located 120 kilometres south-south-east of Delhi in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, in the Holy Land of Braj on the banks of the River Yamuna. Krishna, the eighth incarnation of God Vishnu, was born in Mathura. Jesus was born when the cruel King Herod was reigning in Jerusalem. Herod feared for his throne and decreed that all new-born children in Bethlehem should be killed. In Mathura, the evil King Kamsa was ruling when Krishna was born. Kamsa, too, pursued the God incarnate by commanding new-born children to be killed.

Let us take a closer look at the tradition: Vasudeva, one of the nobles of King Kamsa, wanted to marry the king´s cousin, the beautiful Princess Devaki. Kamsa was given an oracle that he would die soon: The eighth child of the couple would conquer and kill him. To prevent this, Kamsa wanted to kill his cousin Devaki in the wedding coach. But Vasudeva pleaded for the life of his wife. Kamsa gave in on condition that Vasudeva and Devaki would live their life in the palace dungeon and hand over each new-born child to Kamsa. Some years of captivity followed, in which every child that was born had to be handed over to the evil king. Then Devaki became pregnant for the eighth time. In Baghavata Purana we read the following about the birth of Krishna:

"At midnight, when the darkness was strongest, the Lord Vishnu revealed his perfect divine power.

Like the full moon in the east he came forth from the godlike Devaki.

(...)

The Lord said to Devaki:

‚(...) in no other than the human form is it possible for beings to experience and become acquainted with my real existence.

Now I will take on the form of a human baby. Think of me as your son. If you still fear Kamsa, then take me to Gokula quickly and exchange me with my Maya, who has just been born to Yashoda."[3]

The last lines indicate the way the new-born child would be saved. After Krishna was born and Vishnu had spoken, the chains on Vasudeva´s hands fell off, the doors of the dungeon opened and the guards fell into a deep sleep. Vasudeva took the child, laid it in a basket and carried it out of the prison. He left the palace and hurried through the town down to the River Yamuna, because Gokula, where Vishnu had recommended him to take the child, was on the other side of the river. When Vasudeva came to the floodwaters, they parted and stood up on the left and right hand side like walls. So he was able to walk through the river with dry feet. He arrived in Gokula at the house of Yashoda, who was fast asleep Her new-born daughter, Maya, was lying next to her. Vasudeva exchanged the children and hurried back to his wife in the dungeon. Soon after, when Kamsa came into the dungeon to kill the new-born child, not knowing that it had been exchanged, it was torn away and taken up into heaven. Then a voice rang out: "He who will conquer you is alive!" Kamsa sent out his sister, the witch Putana, through the whole country to kill all the new-born children and get rid of the eighth child of the two prisoners. She rubbed her breasts with poison and went from door to door, offering herself to the young mothers as a wet-nurse. Wherever she went, the babies died. When she came to Gokula she found Krishna alone – and suckled him. But the healing energy of the divine child was infinitely greater than Putana´s poison: He sucked her dry, so that she died.

Thus goes the tradition of the birth and protection of the divine child Krishna. To listeners who know biblical Christian traditions, the story of Krishna's birth seems to be both unknown and familiar at the same time. Many motives are known from the Bible stories: The king who feels threatened by the divine child; the birth in the middle of the night; the woman who bears

the child; she is like a goddess and becomes a god-bearer; the child is laid into a basket to save him; chains fall off, the doors of a prison open, guards fall into a deep sleep; threatening floods move aside; innocent children are killed to destroy the incarnation of God. What may be noted in the story of the birth can also be seen in other Krishna traditions and customs when they are compared with Christian religiosity: There are big differences, but also many well-known motifs.

In Braj, with its center of pilgrimage in Vrindavan, just some kilometres north of Mathura, Krishna is worshipped as a child and young boy. As a sweet little boy he steals the cream of Yashoda, his foster-mother. When he is almost grown-up he tends the cattle of the neighbours and plays erotic games with the Gopis, the cowherdesses – the newly-wed wives of his comrades in the village. *Kurukshetra*, north of Delhi, is connected with the worship of Krishna in the tradition of Bhagavadgita,[4] who is the moral adviser on board the chariot of Arjuna the warrior. Arjuna has to go into battle with some of his relatives against other relatives, and asks how he can do right in this paradoxical situation, whereupon he is enlightened by the incarnated God. On the other hand, in Orissa, Krishna is worshipped as a king materialised in a statue with miraculous powers, a Murti.

The fundamental ideas in this tradition are clearly different from the traditions about Jesus. However, no-one can deny that there are similarities in the worship. In Christian churches of different denominations it is also possible to find very different aspects of how the Son of God is worshipped, depending on the historical and cultural environment of the believers. Above all, Jesus can be worshipped as a child, as for example in the popular Christmas religiousness of our days or in the Bambino in the Aracoeli church on the Roman Capitol.[5] He can be the focal point of erotic yearning, as he was in the mysticism of women in the Middle Ages or in Zinzendorf's "Brüdergemeine". He can suffer or be triumphant on the cross, as in Gothic or Romanic presentations of the crucifixion. He can appear as the omnipotent ruler on mosaic cupolas such as in Dafni in Athens, or he can lay claim to the service of his warriors, as he does in the crusades or in the nocturnal religious exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. He can also be presented primarily as a teacher of morals, as he was in the German "Kulturprotestantismus" of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

If one compares the ways in which the incarnate God is worshipped, there will surely be more differences than similarities, but one can imagine that people who have grown up in the worship of Krishna, or who live in it as new converts, can gain strength, consolation and orientation for their lives from these traditions, and become capable of sincere veneration of God and active charity – just as Christians can from their traditions. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that, in certain circumstances, some of them may tend towards asceticism and estrangement from the world and possibly even towards exclusivism and fanaticism.

II.

In the last few decades the possibilities of getting in touch and being in *contact with people from different cultures and religions* have increased tremendously. There is no corner of the world which isn't travelled to, no sphere of life that has not been discovered. Customs and religious ideas are studied and documented. Many old traditions are declining because of the processes of modernisation in society, marked by Coca Cola and blue jeans, or because of opposition to them and attempts to stamp them out, as we have seen in Tiibet and can still see to some extent. Some ideas from non-Christian religions have been accepted into our cultural environment. Members of other religions and cultures are living with us permanently, sometimes in large numbers. The religious scene in our own home-place has developed a diversity never known before, and the diversification is continuing. Nonetheless, even basic traditions

of other religions – like the one described above – are scarcely noted by outsiders. This should be a reason for reflection, as processes reaching deep into the heart of human beings and expressed in hymns, prayers and rites are connected with those traditions.

That these things are so deeply rooted inside human beings is connected with the fact that *religion* normally has an orientating and integrating function.[6] This applies not only to the Christian religion and not only to theistic traditions. Religion enables the individual to determine himself between the past and the future, between birth and death, in the context of social relations, the world, society and the state, and it enables that person to find his own place in life.[7] That is not easy. Former societies were more uniform and more constant than ours. By means of fixed traditions or compulsory laws they prescribed for their members what "religio" they should have and in accordance with what teachings and rites they should integrate themselves. This happened e.g. according to the motto "Cuius regio, eius religio", which was in force in Europe for two and a half centuries. In our culture nowadays everyone has to find their own place and integrate themselves into it individually. The teachings and rites they use to do so have to be chosen from a plenteous supply. Religion is now scarcely connected with compulsion from authorities or traditions, but with the necessity to make choices. The church has to respond to this more and more. The church no longer has a monopoly in questions of religion; it has become one amongst others. The question of the *future of Christianity* as a social significance is the question of how the church presents itself in the market-place of religious possibilities.

Religion develops an orientating and integrating function in a complex process that does not rule out disorientation and disintegration. The context of social relations, the world and society in which people have to find their way, is prescribed to them on the one hand; on the other hand, it is produced by human beings in its concrete form and it is also formed in part by those directly concerned. Nevertheless it is normally experienced as something that is strange, ominous and scarcely to be influenced. It is the function of religion, by means of its rites and teachings, to reconcile humans to the circumstances they live in. The rites that are of particular importance are those which accompany life in connection with birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death. Religion allows people to order their lives, it gives them meaning, it helps them to endure crises and stabilise emotions, and motivates them to take action. It may also awaken the willingness of people to cut themselves off from the world[8] or to depart from this world. Religion integrates individuals into larger contexts, but not necessarily in harmony with their fellows. Religion may also strengthen destructive forces and cause them to erupt. The integrating function of religion can also have the opposite effect and produce disintegration. The history of Christianity shows many examples of that; as one characteristic example I mention the process in which 900 years ago western Christianity was united under the leadership of the Pope in the Crusades. The other side of this inner unification of the Latin West was its outward aggression against Muslims, Jews and Orthodox Christians.

Our culture mainly takes note of non-Christian religions in three ways: 1. They are represented by such a large number of immigrants that they cannot be ignored any more, e.g. if they want to build a place of worship that may perhaps be identified as such by a minaret. 2. They draw attention to themselves somewhere in the world by spectacular military-political activities that are widely broadcast in the news. In such a case the correct but meaningless statement is usually made that the terrorists were extremist fundamentalists. 3. They do mission among us – in a traditional form or as "new religious movements". The large churches normally react to this through their experts on Weltanschauung or sectarianism, who see themselves as a kind of religious advisory board and especially warn in public against charlatanism and enticements, something which is sometimes necessary. Only seldom can initiatives for constructive dialogue be seen besides the warnings.

Since religious thinking, feeling and acting are time and again combined with enormous political and social energy,[9] theological reflection and training should be concerned with relationships with other religions more than they have been so far. For centuries pastors in the big churches in our culture have been given the public assignment to play a major part in the formation of religious life. Religious societies have their status of public law corporations guaranteed in the constitution. Out of a sense of social responsibility the inherited structures of the "Volkskirchen" with their special status should be nurtured and made use of to create an atmosphere of irenical dialogue between the various religions, including the new religious movements. In their training, pastors should be taught to initiate this kind of irenical dialogue.

There are historic examples of such approaches: We can see a process of learning through the centuries among the Christian denominations in Europe. It began when the above-mentioned "Cuius region, eius religio" was still a law of the Reich and it was the political aim in many states to have only one denomination in that state. Especially in German history it was a long and difficult path for first Lutherans and members of the Reformed Church, then Protestants and Catholics, and finally even Christians and Jews to learn to live together in one state without excluding the weaker group from the enjoyment of certain rights. But the culture of peaceful co-existence is always under threat. It was possible to destroy it in the times of crisis after 1929 in a very few years

Historical theology can make a contribution towards irenical co-existence, on the one hand in its historical function and on the other hand in its theological function. In the following we shall take a look at both functions, and then consider the meaning of both for dialogue with other religions. First let us turn to the historical function.

III.

The historical side of historical theology is the history of Christianity. In principle it does not differ from the history of other religions, e.g. Islam or Hinduism, It researches and portrays the history of the Christian churches, their teachings, persons, movements and institutions. It deals with their many rites and forms of devotion. It looks at the religious movements that were active inside and outside of church institutions, to some extent separate from the big churches or opposed to them. It brings out strong points, reveals weak points, names errors, does not conceal wrong developments and catastrophes. It reminds present-day church members of *past,* frequently also forgotten, *insights and teachings of the Christian faith, thought, life and action,* both successful and unsuccessful.

Historical theology has the task of recalling to mind time and again past connections between faith and life. By reminding us of the circumstances in the past in which people believed, doubted and thought theologically, historical theology wants to return the historical dimension to the theological thoughts of those went before us, that seem now to be unhistorical and abstract, and they let us sense something of their explosive nature at the time. As the history of theological traditions of thought alone (history of theology) it can scarcely fulfil this. If possible, the more or less pious psychological make-up of people formerly must be examined along with persons and traditions of thought, material circumstances and social processes. For this, an inter-faculty approach is essential, both within the theological disciplines and beyond the bounds of theology.

Sometimes historical theology also reveals surprising facts: Religious plays in which the whole population of a town participated; extensive Easter dances in college churches that made the bishops suspicious; ecstatic rapture of ascetic pietistic communities when celebrating Communion, where the Lord's Supper was experienced as the physical union of the heav-

enly bridegroom with his chosen bride and described as the humours of the bodies merging with each other. These are all forms of Christian cult that developed historically. The question may be asked what can inspire the religious praxis of the present. Do religious plays of the past have anything in common with bibliodrama? Is it permissible to dance ecstatically in sacred rooms? What about religious eroticism? Historical theology performs the labour of recalling things to mind, in view of the fact that t

he church must be organised and led responsibly today.[10] In doing so, it does not abandon the hope that people can learn from history.

IV.

It is the task of church history in its theological aspects to always *remind us of the principle historical limitations* of every formulation of creeds and teachings, of every form of spiritual life and worship, of every church constitution, also of the limits of alternative movements in the church – and of all other such topics of its research work. It has a critical function with regard to every historical aspect of the church and shows us that it is human beings who are in action everywhere. It should do this of course always aware that it is also subject to those limitations and that the same will happen to itself. It will also be criticised and its preliminary character and insufficiency as history will be shown up. Historical theology *does not have to apologise to a historical quantity* but reminds us of the fact that the true Church is not built by human beings, but built and preserved by God. The true Church is the subject of faith and confession.

How far can historical theology describe the working of the Holy Spirit? It can do so in so far as, besides those examples of human religious activity that have to be treated critically, the unconditional promise of the gospel, God's unconditional acceptance of the human race – which can also appear as man's acceptance of man – comes out clearly, e.g. in preaching in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, in the administering of the sacraments, or in active charity. But the working of the Holy Spirit in history can as such not be the object of historical reasoning.

Historical theology has the task of keeping alive an awareness of what Karl Barth called "göttliches Urteil über alles Menschliche" (divine judgement on all things human). There is no human activity in history that could stand before God. Therefore Barth says that not only "die Welt der Götter Griechenlands oder Indiens oder die Welt der Weisheit Chinas oder auch die Welt des römischen Katholizismus" (the world of the gods of Greece or India or the world of China's wisdom or the world of Roman Catholicism) is subject to this judgement. But "(es wird) auch unsere eigene protestantische Glaubenswelt als solche in dem umfassenden Sinn jenes göttlichen Urteils wirklich preisgegeben" (our own protestant beliefs as such will also be subjected to that divine judgement in its entirety).[11] The thought in verse 8 of hymn number 528 in the Protestant Hymnbook is true for all theology and every form of visible church: "Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig, sind der Menschen Sachen! Alles, alles, was wir sehen, das muß fallen und vergehen." (Oh, how worthless, oh, how fleeting, are the things of humans! All, all that we see must fall and decay). There is only room left for the promise: "Wer Gott fürcht´, wird ewig stehen." (He who fears God will stand for ever.)

Now we have come to the Reformation idea of justification: God alone acts. No human beings can reach the target, not as individuals nor as a genus. This is meant by the word sin, the fundamental separation of human beings from God, from the true being and entity that does not lie inside ourselves nor historically before us. We are given our perfection as a gift from outside ourselves – *extra nos* – or we do not get it at all. Luther's understanding – and that of

many other reformers – of the relationship of the law to the gospel as defended by Paul is, despite some variations in the details, the central point of reference of Protestant historical theology. But we have to remind ourselves that the gospel does not cancel the law.[12] It is given by God for the salvation of man and to serve life on earth. It remains in force and exists to be fulfilled. The Gospel exists alongside the Law, and it is a completely different entity. The Gospel says that the fulfilment or lack of fulfilment of the Law does not finally decide about a human being. This is what I consider the central point which Protestant theology should debate about with other approaches to Christian or non-Christian theology.

V.

What contribution can historical theology make on the basis of its tasks as described above towards dialogue with other religions? Here it is only possible to mention some important points. Further, I wish to show what chances there are for historical theology if it also takes a look at other religions in its work.

1. Christianity, which we believe and confess to contain God's revelation, is always religion in its historical appearance.[13] It is not intrinsically different from other religions in this regard. From a theological point of view it is, just as they are, subject to God over against all human manifestations of life and over against history.

2. It cannot be ruled out from the start that in other religions something of the light of divine truth can also be found. According to biblical testimony and Reformation teaching, the Law is also written in the hearts of those who do not know Christ. Therefore it can be assumed that they too search for knowledge of God earnestly, and love of God and one´s neighbour is also practised in other religions.

3. The fact that in Christ all treasures and knowledge of wisdom is given and that nobody comes to the Father but through Christ[14] does not mean that God cannot have prepared the way differently for others. It should be remembered that for example Calvin assumed that a number of mysteries will be veiled until Judgement Day. He also reckons with the possibility of Christ's *etiam extra ecclesiam* connected with gift of communion with *etiam extra coenam,* of God´s government *etiam extra lege.*[15]

4. On the Catholic side, the Second Vatican Council in the "Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen" (Declaration about the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions) considered this question cautiously, but clearly. It says there, with special regard to Hinduism and Buddhism: "Mit aufrichtigem Ernst betrachtet sie (sc. die Kirche) jene Handlungs- und Lebensweisen, jene Vorschriften und Lehren, die zwar in manchem von dem abweichen, was sie selber für wahr hält und lehrt, doch nicht selten einen Strahl jener Wahrheit erkennen lassen, die alle Menschen erleuchtet." (The church considers those ways of behaving and living, those regulations and teachings, which may vary in some ways from what it maintains and teaches, but very often allow a ray of the truth to be seen that enlightens all people.) In the next paragraph, the declaration says that the church itself talks about revelation in Christ.[16] The following should not be forgotten: It is not a question of our searching for truth in the rites and Scriptures of others. The point is, with what attitude do we meet them? Do we deny that they have a ray of the light of truth, or do we reckon with it? Do we think that the reign of Christ *etiam extra ecclesiam,* communion with Christ *etiam extra coenam* is a possible way for God which we should not judge by excluding them, even though that way has not been shown to us? That is all on the pre-conditions for dialogue with other religions. The following points refer to the dialogue itself.

5. In an encounter between Christianity and other religions, similar historical phenomena come together. There are points of contact – and comparison s are possible.

6. It is possible to sound out how far there are similarities. This should be on a structural level as well as on a dogmatic level. But it makes little sense to begin by finding out the differences in teaching. In any case, finding out about each other presupposes respect and understanding for the others' religious stance. It is not necessary to renounce one's own point of view, on the contrary, one's own point of view should be accepted and explained.

7. For further structural comparisons it is important to note: Other religions have similar organisational tasks to solve as Christians in various denominations. They have the problem of establishing ceremonies and counselling, regulating them and passing on teaching. They arrange districts for counselling or organise parishes with pastors and teachers. They carry out rites accompanying stages in life, know sacramental ceremonies, prayers and pilgrimages. They develop forms of life in communities and orders. As in Christianity, so too in some other religions, there are branches which reject the use of images emphatically and others that make a passionate plea for them.

8. Study and contact with other religions make it possible to gain stimuli for the study of the history of one´s own religion.

Let me give an example of this: In Hindu temples – in the big temple above the birth dungeon in Mathura, too – the great importance attached to viewing sacred things is conspicuous. The priest carries out the ceremony behind a curtain for a long time, serving the deity, fanning air to him, bathing, dressing and entertaining him. At the ring of a bell the curtain opens and singing, hand-drums and instruments can be heard. The people come in shoals to view the statue with the miraculous powers. At big feasts many thousands of people wait for hours at the temple until they are shown in to view the presence of the holy one with their own eyes.

Here there are parallels to the exhibition of relics and the viewing of the transformed host in the elevation during mass – less in present-day than in mediaeval practice. Nowadays Catholic Christians are accustomed to looking downwards, humbly kneeling until the bell has been rung by the servers. In the Middle Ages the reaction was just the opposite: The people looked up to see the Body of Christ and to have Communion quasi with their eyes. We know from the teachings of the Freethinkers, a small mediaeval group of heretics, that they tried to wean their newly-won members away from the need to view the Body of Christ in a process of re-education that lasted for years.[17] In some churches and chapels hagioscopes can still be see: openings in the wall of the church[18] or the choir screen[19] for those who were refused permission to take part in the mass directly. Mediaeval inquisition records[20] report on the deep hurt that people in the south of France felt when they were excluded from taking part in the services by order of their bishop, because they had refused to pay the tithe. They suffered mainly – surprisingly, for us – from not being able to see the host. The clergy shut the church doors to prevent their unruly sheep viewing the sacred thing. One of those affected said it would be better if the churches were pulled down and the altars built on open fields. Then everybody could see the salvation given by God. This is a religiosity of the eyes that is keyed to the material visibility of salvation and which we can also find in other cultural contexts, independent of dogmatic forms, but at first it seems rather strange to our culture, which is more keyed to listening.

The study of other religions is necessary because ignorance gives room to prejudice. Thus we can find, for example, the century-old prejudice among Christians that charity springing from love for God is specific to their own religion. Johann Hinrich Wichern formulated this idea in

classical form in the first sentence[21] of his report on the conference in Monbijou in 1856. But this idea is not compatible with important traditions of Hindu teaching, for example. Klaus K. Klostermaier has pointed out that in the present era, the Kalijuga, active charity is the appropriate form of religious exercise for Hindus.[22]

10. In inter-religious dialogue attention should be paid to analogies of how people feel existential consternation and how they express it. Wolfgang Philipp, who devoted a great part of his studies to theological irenics, bases his ideas on three types of structure in his "Prolegomena zu einer vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte" (Introduction to a Comparative History of Religion). These structures are not normally found alone, but appear with different weightings in one or another corner of a triangle. He distinguishes the I, You and It-Structures.The I-Structure is turned inward, orientated towards oneself. The You-Structure wants to have interpersonal relationships and is orientated towards a goal. The It-Structure centres on objective, supra-individual realities of being. Philipp says that the description of these three structures is helpful in rationalisation and objectivation of the motives and laws that not only Christian denominations, but also other world religions, philosophies, ideologies and political systems use to fight battle against each other. He understands his use of categories as a method for analysing structures and criticising ideologies that allows him to observe the phenomena from a standpoint outside of the categories. From this it is possible to get ideas for the work of historical theology and inter-religious dialogue.[23]

11. Nevertheless, comparisons should not only be made outside of these categories. Comparisons can also be made between religions.[24] Historical theology can also consider other religions, for example in research into the question of the justification of man by grace alone. It is possible to examine whether their rites, teachings and theological concepts do not also mention God's unconditional promise.

12. But here there are considerable problems of method. It is necessary to become familiar with strange views of life and patterns of thinking and argumentation and to ask if and how, under these very different conditions, truly similar or the same thoughts can really be formulated or have been formulated already.

The declaration of the Second Vatican Council "On the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions", cited above, recommends a procedure that entails unusual assumptions. First of all, it talks of the ray from the light of divine truth which may also be found among non-christians.[25] A little later it says that the Church should admonish its sons – the daughters are surely meant, too – "daß sie mit Klugheit und Liebe, durch Gespräch und Zusammenarbeit mit den Bekennern anderer Religionen sowie durch ihr (sc. eigenes) Zeugnis des christlichen Glaubens und Lebens jene geistlichen und sittlichen Güter und auch die sozial-kulturellen Werte, die sich bei ihnen (sc. den anderen Religionen) finden, anerkennen, wahren und fördern." (that they recognise, preserve and further with prudence and love, those spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values that they discover in them (the other religions), by means of discussion and co-operation with the members of other religions and by their (own) witness to the Christian faith and life).

The fathers of the Council hope that in their testimony of faith brothers and sisters not only *accept, guard and advance the social and cultural values,* but also the *moral and spiritual values of other religions*! If this happens, irenical dialogue has become reality. Christians will then naturally respect stories like that of the birth and saving of the child Krishna besides the central traditional Christmas story.

* Slightly revised version of the contribution I made on January 23rd, 1996 in the course of lectures about "Die Zukunft des Christentums" at the Theological Faculty, Bielefeld-Bethel, Germany.)

Notes

1. In the following I use the expressions ecclesiastical history and historical theology as synonyms. Cf. Friedrich D. Schleiermacher, Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studiums von 1804/04, Kritische Ausgabe, ed. by H. Scholz (1982) 58-73, where he explains in Part 2, Section 2, §§ 149-194, "Die historische Theologie im engeren Sinne oder die Kirchengeschichte".
2. Since the mid-eighties I am in contact with Christians from Northern India and Vaishnava priests from Brindavan (U.P., India) developed through the Institute for Irenics (Religious Peace Research) of the University of Frankfurt/Main. The encounter with Eastern teachings on reincarnation was very stimulating for my studies on the Catharism.
3. Das liebliche Krishna-Kind, in: Die Erzählungen von Vishnu. Indische Mythen und Legenden aus dem Bhagavata Purana und Überlieferungen aus Tamilnadu und Orissa, ed., translated from the English and with a commentary by Icke Schwalbe (1989) 84.
4. Bhagavadgita. Das Lied der Gottheit. Translated from Sanskrit by R. Boxberger, newly revised and ed. by H. von Glasenapp (1984).
5. Cf. e.g. also the miraculous image of "Maria im Pesch" in the northern transept of Cologne Cathedral.
6. Cf. with the following paragraph: Thomas Luckmann, Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft (1963).
7. 2nd Vaticanum, Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche (LThK), vol. 13, p. 489: "Die Menschen erwarten von den verschiedenen Religionen Antwort auf die ungelösten Rätsel des menschlichen Daseins, die heute wie von je die Herzen der Menschen im tiefsten bewegen: Was ist der Mensch? Was ist Sinn und Ziel unseres Lebens? Was ist das Gute, was ist die Sünde? Woher kommt das Leid, und welchen Sinn hat es? Was ist der Weg zum wahren Glück? Was ist der Tod, das Gericht und die Vergeltung nach dem Tode? Und schließlich: Was ist jenes letzte und unsagbare Geheimnis unserer Existenz, aus dem wir kommen und wohin wir gehen?"
8. Extremely binding forms of life in religious communities have their origins here.
9. A positive example of such a connection are the "von Bodelschwinghsche Anstalten" in Bethel.
10. Cf. the definition of the tasks of historical theology by Schleiermacher (note 1).
11. K. Barth, Kirchliche Dogmatik II, 327-28.
12. Law does not mean the Torah, but the plentitude of religious and philosophical rules of life and their comments that should be in force in the sense of the Double Commandment of love of God and one's neighbour, that sums up the Law.
13. This is correct, despite Barth's objection that religion is unbelief. Barth assumes the fundamental opposition of revelation and religion: "... nicht ..., daß der Mensch ... mit Gottes Offenbarung harmonisch zusammenwirke, daß Religion etwa die ausgestreckte Hand sei, die dann von Gott in seiner Offenbarung gefüllt werde. ... in der Religion wehrt und verschließt sich der Mensch gegen die Offenbarung dadurch, daß er sich einen Ersatz beschafft, daß er sich vorwegnimmt, was ihm in ihr von Gott gegeben werden soll ..." (Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2, 330-31).
14. With Col. 2,3 and John 14,6.
15. CR 30, 156, according to W. Nijenhuis, Calvin, Theologische Real-Enzyklopädie (TRE) vol. 7, 583. Zwingli also assumes that all knowledge of God and the truth is mediated by the Holy Spirit, who is not bound to the History of Salvation in the narrow sense. Cf. W.D. Hauschild, Geist / Heiliger Geist / Geistesgaben IV, TRE 12, 211. Even Balaam´s donkey obeyed the Spirit of God, as is known.
16. Cf. note 7.
17. Cf. M. Benad, "Alles, was das Auge sieht und begehrt, soll die Hand befolgen." Zentrale Motive freigeistiger Religiosität nach der Confessio des Johannes von Brünn (um 1535), in: A. Mehl / W.C. Schneider (Eds.), Festschrift Lothar Graf zu Dohna (1989) 75-96.
18. Cf. St. Martin in Canterbury or the Parish church of Granhult in the south of Smaland, Sweden. On Granhult cf. M. Ullén, Holzkirchen im mittelalterlichen Stift Växjö, in C. Ahrens, Frühe Holzkirchen im nördlichen Europa, exhibition catalogue (1982) 321-342, illustration 8, 329.
19. In St. Mary's in the town of Gelnhausen (Germany) it is still possible to see a device from the late 15th century that can be pushed aside and which, when open, allowed the members of the congregation to observe the elevation of the host when mass was being celebrated at the altar behind the choir screen by the Premonstratensian canons from Selbold (near Gelnhausen).
20. Cf. J. Duvernoy (Ed.), Le registre d' inquisition de Jacques Fournier évèque de Pamiers (1318-1325), 3 vols. (1965, Corrections 1972), vol. II, 313 sq.
21. Johann Hinrich Wichern, Gutachten betreffend die Diakonie und den Diakonat, in: Aktenstücke aus der Verwaltung des Evangelischen Oberkirchenraths, vol. 3 (Berlin 1856) 127-197.

22. Cf. Klaus K. Klostermaier, Charity in Hinduism, in: Matthias Benad / EdmundWeber (Eds.), Diakonie der Religionen 1, THEION - Annual for Religious Culture VII (1996) 111-118.
23. Cf. Wolfgang Philipp, Trinität ist unser Sein. Prolegomena zu einer vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte (1983). By the way, there are parallels to the distinction between mysticism, sects and the church as effective forces of church history, cf. Ernst Troeltsch, Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen (1922, Reprint 1977) 967 sq.
24. Cf. e.g. Edmund Weber, Free Love and Bhakti. An Inter-Religious Study on Martin Luther and Shri Krishna Caitanya, Journal of Religious Culture No. 16 (1998).
25. Cf. note 7.

Mailto: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de