



Johannes Lähnemann

Encounter - Dialogue – Co-operation. Interreligious Learning in the Community

Abstract

“Encounter – Dialogue – Co-operation” are the three main steps for productive and sound development of interreligious relations. This article is explained based on 32 years of meetings, exchange, and mutual spiritual enrichment in the Nuremberg group of the international movement religions for peace, which is the world’s largest and most representative coalition of religious communities in peace matters. The learning process can be seen as a model for the opportunities of local interfaith movements: visiting each other, opening the doors; practicing the dialogue on shared values as well



Prof. Dr. Johannes Lähnemann ist emeritierter Professor für Religions-pädagogik an der Friedrich Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

as on differences - in respect for each other; collaborating for common interests, but also as partners for civic engagement; promoting educational efforts for tolerance and mutual understanding. Concrete outcomes of the work – brochures, books, declarations, demonstrative actions – are explained.

Keywords

Interreligious dialogue on the local level, chances of interreligious encounter, interreligious co-operation in civil society, education for tolerance, interreligious activity for human rights

1 Introduction

The Nuremberg group of the International movement *Religions for Peace*¹ was founded in 1988. Since then, we have held monthly meetings - more than 300 in total. The learning process can be seen as a model for the opportunities of local interfaith movements: visiting each other in the places of worship; learning from the spiritual life of other believers; receiving an authentic view of the different religious communities, their rituals, and their activities in religious services, in charitable activities, in cultural and social life; practicing the dialogue on common values, but also about differences, misunderstandings, and prejudices; working together as partners for civic engagement, for collaboration of different groups for human rights and against all

¹ For background and history see H. A. Jack: WCRP: A History of the World Conference on Religions and Peace (since 1995: Religions for Peace). New York 1993.

forms of extremism; cooperating with schools and other educational institutions, inspiring lively encounter and exchange; tackling together global challenges - justice, peace, integrity of life - on a local, national and international level. In public declarations, we have tackled problems like rising xenophobia, the life of minorities, and education for tolerance and mutual understanding. Concrete work outcomes can be demonstrated in publications such as the booklet "Offene Türen. Religionsgemeinschaften in Nürnberg und Umgebung" - "Open doors. Religious Communities in Nürnberg and the Region" in which 50 religious communities present themselves through introductions, pictures, and contact forms; the book "Spiritualität. Multireligiös. Begegnung der Religionen in Gebeten, Besinnungen, Liedern"² - "Spirituality. Multi-religious. Religious Encounters in Prayer, Meditation and Hymns". It contains 20 prayer meetings with full texts, sermons, and songs. In 2020, a summary of 32 years of interfaith work in Nuremberg was published under the title: "Begegnung – Verständigung – Kooperation. Interreligiöse Arbeit vor Ort. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven aus Nürnberg"³ - "Encounter – dialogue – co-operation. Interreligious work in the community. Experiences and perspectives from Nuremberg".

I will give the main outlines of the learning processes on the three levels of encounter, dialogue, and cooperation. In their interrelation, they build a comprehensive way of living dynamically and fruitfully together. They involve the whole person – mind and body. It often begins with concrete steps – approaching each other, physically moving to places and persons which traditionally are not close to one another.

² J. Lähnemann, *Religionen für den Frieden Nürnberg: Spiritualität. Multireligiös. Begegnung der Religionen in Gebeten, Besinnungen, Liedern.* Berlin 2014.

³ J. Lähnemann: *Begegnung – Verständigung – Kooperation. Interreligiöse Arbeit vor Ort. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven aus Nürnberg.* Göttingen 2020.

2 Encounter

Encounter means experiencing hospitality, observing the forms of living faiths, the possibilities, and problems to practice it in our society. It is more than just watching the religious plurality. Real encounter includes openness a sense of curiosity. We learn to marvel before we understand and judge. To give just two examples from our city: Visiting the Nuremberg Synagogue with a group of students from the university, we listened to its former president Arno Hamburger, born in Nuremberg in the 1920'-s, who fled Nazi-Germany just before the beginning of World War II, returning after it and founding the new Jewish congregation. When he told about the history of Judaism in the city and the fate of his family, everybody was touched. Or there is the Medina meeting room that young Muslim families lead. They have a model mosque where students can put on an Imam's robe and learn how to behave during prayer. This offers opportunities to observe what is strange for oneself and what seems surprising and moving and reflecting on one's own convictions and behavior. Where interreligious conflicts are erupting, this first step for a dialogue very often has not happened. In this case, stereotypes of the Other can be nurtured and can be misused for fanaticisms. On the other side, through mutual hospitality, trust can grow, and exchange becomes possible in which no one has to be afraid of being treated without sensitivity.

3 Dialogue

Dialogue as a 2nd level means the respectful exchange about different beliefs. It helps to understand different religious systems in their historical and actual contexts – and therefore to overcome prejudices and misunderstandings. To discover what is common teaches to see and respect differences. To recognize the spiritual richness of the different traditions, helps find common

grounds for dealing with moral and social challenges. In this process, a firm grounding in one's own religious traditions can bring about respect for each other.⁴

There are three main fields of interreligious dialogue:

- 1) The explanation of our own belief in a respectful and open manner
- 2) Working out what is common among us, where we differ, and where we are separated (and *why* it is common, different, or separating us)
- 3) Discovering the spiritual and moral sources for dealing with the problems of life and global challenges which touch us all

- 1) Outlining the basics of one's faith is best begun at the encounter stage. Churches, mosques, synagogues, Buddhist meditation rooms are visible and eloquent witnesses to the faith. Muslims in particular, for whom their religious duties are a clear external expression of their faith, enquire about the tangible, visible expressions of Christianity and find what is for them the most accessible way into the Christian faith through the stories and interpretations associated with them. Thus the cross, the altar, the pulpit, the font, and so on illuminate this substance, as does the mihrab, the prayer mat, the minbar, and inscriptions for God and Muhammad in the mosque.

This manner of entering into someone else's faith is deepened when we begin to read key texts of the respective religions and to interpret them to each other.

⁴ Cf. J. Lähnemann: Interreligious Understanding: Communities Developing at Different Tempos in a Local Context. *British Journal of Religious Education (BJRE)* 22, 3/2000, 140-149.

- 2) This process leads us directly into the second step: theological dialogue. In respect of other faiths, we discover where and how they speak of God and humanity, of human duties and human fallibility, of sin and salvation, of responsibility for family life, community, society, and the world at large. We discover similarities between supposed revelations, similar questions being asked, and similar patterns of experience, as well as contrasting emphases, disagreements, and outright contradictions. We discover creation theology as a unifying strand between the monotheistic faiths, with far-reaching implications for an understanding of human duties, and social, ethical and ecological responsibilities. We discover the basic contrast between this and the conception of the eternal cycle of the worlds and individual lives found in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Their vision of people unites all the great religious traditions as creatures who constantly miss their mark and whose natures are warped by focusing exclusively on themselves and their own egoistic interests rather than be 'reconnected' (the root meaning of 'religio') to a transcendent absolute, in a relationship that bestows meaning and purpose. At the same time disagreements and outright contradictions become apparent and must be openly acknowledged. Consider, for example, the different interpretations of Jesus: central to Christianity as savior, one of several possible incarnations of God in Hinduism, one of the prophets in Islam. We are able, though, to avoid seeing differences such as these in isolation, seeing them instead in the context of meaning as it pertains in the respective religions. In particular, grounds for respecting people of other faiths, for embracing above all the stranger, are to be found in all religions, as is encouragement for shared action transcending the boundaries of one's own particular faith.

- 3) This strand in the process of understanding – dialogue focused on shared challenges – leads directly to the third element: practical co-operation between the various faith communities. It is characterized by keywords of the conciliar process – justice, peace, integrity of creation - or perhaps even better by the irrevocable directives of the Global Ethic Declaration: commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life; commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order; commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness; commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women; commitment to a culture of sustainability and care for the earth.

4 Co-operation

Let me now illustrate how co-operation at a local level can be undertaken with reference once again to the Nuremberg group of *Religions for Peace*.

What arose as a matter of immediate concern from our meetings was a joint information about the various faith communities in Nuremberg – as a quick help to overcome ignorance and misunderstanding. The result was the booklet entitled “Open Doors”.⁵ The title signals clearly a refusal to let oneself be shut away in a closed world of faith and practice, and a readiness to open up, to tell the world who you are and what you stand for, and to welcome others as guests into your community, indeed into your home. Copies of this unconventional “town guide” are now to be found in Nuremberg’s schools. Similar initiatives have occurred in other cities such as Hannover and Berlin. Our booklet has been

⁵ Available from the Chair for Religious Education Nürnberg, www.evrel.phil.fau.de.

revised several times. In the 1st edition of 1992, 19 faith communities had introduced themselves. In the 5th edition of 2017, 50 religious congregations are presented, many new due to the growing mobility and plurality – and not least through the flight crisis since 2015.

Further development has been to organize multireligious devotional meetings. Members of different faith come together to pray, meditate, and offer readings, expositions, and hymns to support peace. These are not joint religious services or exercises in joint worship. We come together as “guests” at devotions by members of the different faiths, united across our differences by the quest for peace. In this way, we are able to experience first-hand something of the spiritual strength of the various faiths. Preparing for such occasion is especially rewarding, as when for example, texts chosen from different religions are brought together to illustrate a common theme, as for example “Changing one’s ways: purification of the spirit”, “Let’s shelter the earth”, “Terrorism has no religion”, “solidarity of the religions during the Corona crisis”.

The Nuremberg RfP group has been consulted by schools several times when they reflect upon the possibilities of worship with students from different Christian denominations, from Islam, and from other religions. This is of specific relevance as in Germany, we do not have the tradition of morning “assemblies” or “collective worship” as in Britain, where these questions have been discussed for a long time. Co-operation between local inter-faith groups and schools can, in general, be fruitful at a time when new efforts are being made to bind school education together with experiences in everyday life, in community developments including politically and socially relevant groups – that is, with the context of life in which students will act as equal partners in the future.

Unsurprisingly, these meetings have also been the occasion of joint declarations, for example, at the beginning of the Gulf war,

after the attacks of September 11th 2001 in New York and Washington DC, during the flight crisis, and actual in the Corona crisis. Members of the different faiths have come out against any attempt to misuse God's name in support of the war, political agitation, or fanaticism and support the rights of foreigners, minorities, and refugees. There is a particular symbolism in Jews, Christians, and Muslims speaking out together, along with members of other religions and nonreligious civil agencies, in the city which once gave birth to the Nazi race laws.⁶

Co-operation means, further, friendship growing across the boundaries of religions and world views, assistance for religiously mixed families, and public support for both individuals and groups which encounter difficulties.

The three steps – encounter, dialogue, co-operation – do not constitute a fixed timetable. Often, for example, it is an urgent need for co-operation that really sets in motion the process of understanding. Yet these three categories do help us to take in the full range and multiple dimensions of interfaith dialogue. They indicate the path which can lead us to reach out to each other, to open our hearts, and to give inspiration to the future generations for an open and fruitful living and to act together.

References

J. Lähnemann:

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⁶ The wider context is explained in the article J. Lähnemann: The Contribution of Interreligious Initiatives to Human Rights Education. In M.L. Pirner, J. Lähnemann, H. Bielefeldt (Ed.): *Human Rights and Religion in Educational Contexts.* Springer Int. Publishing Switzerland 2016. = *Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Rights Bd. 1*, 323-329.

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