Lecture at the Conference of European Pastors' Association, Liebfrauenberg, 13.06.2022.

Religious Plurality in Europe
Theological and Practical Challenges

In the study paper "Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe", which we formulated in a working group of the CPCE [Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe] from 2014 to 2018, we sought first of all to provide an overview of the importance and place of religion in European societies. In doing so, it became evident to us how different the situation of religious plurality and the significance of the Protestant church is in European nations. It is difficult to make general statements. The more one finetunes the observation instrument, the more clearly one can see the differences. This is not only true *between* nations but also within these nations. In Switzerland, for example, religious matters are regulated on the cantonal level; for that reason, as is generally true of Switzerland: Everything can vary from canton to canton. Only when one zooms out and looks at the situation from a greater distance can one make general statements, which remain somewhat abstract.

This affects, for instance, the change in the relationship between religion and politics. In the formerly Communist countries of Europe, religion is again accorded more societal relevance from politics, while in Western countries, there is a growing decoupling. In many of these countries, this results in a more substantial separation of church and state. In Sweden, for example, the Lutheran church lost its status as an established church in 2000. Similarly, the cantonal church in Bern has been partially released from its close ties to the state. In some countries, Canon law tends to transform into general religious law. At the same time, the question of which religious communities receive official recognition is being renegotiated.

The topic of *secularization* offers much to discuss as well. The earlier theory of secularization, which goes back to Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, according to which religion would increasingly lose ground and eventually disappear because of increasing modernization, rationalization, and adoption of a more scientific understanding of reality, have lost their validity. It is undeniable that the established churches have lost standing in society and continue to do so. As a result, the premise today is that religion is not in the process of disappearing but of transformatio: Religious individualization and pluralism are increasing. Elements of diverse religious traditions are combined and become lived out in fluid identity formation as part of life.

One can see that the process of secularization is proceeding, but in different ways and speeds in various countries. Even within countries, there are differences between urban and rural areas and between regions marked by Catholicism or Protestantism.

As an aside: With theories in the sociology of religion, it matters what the material basis underlies it. As a rule, four indicators come into play: Membership in a religious community, participation in the activities of this group (attendance in worship services, for in-

stance), personal religious practice (for example, frequency of prayer), and attitudes of faith (such as belief in a personal God or a higher power). How one weighs these factors results in a different picture. For instance, the former Reformation centres in Switzerland – Geneva, Zurich, Basel – are to a high degree secular, if one looks at membership (Basel ca. 15% Reformed), but thoroughly religious, if one asks about religious attitudes, as in the case of the Bertelsmann Religion monitor.

My lecture will proceed in four parts, in which I will consider the situation of religious plurality and its theological processing from four perspectives. In the first part, I will consider from a historical perspective the question of why the Protestant churches have had a harder time dealing with this than the Roman Catholic, for instance. In the second part, I will consider the current religious landscape in Europe from a *sociology of religion* perspective. My concern, however, will not be a description of the situation in each country but a theory of religion interpretation from afar. In part three, I will cast a light on the practical challenges facing the churches with regard to religious plurality. In other words, I will employ the perspective of practical theology. Finally, part four will look for theological interpretations of religious plurality from a systematic theological perspective.

1. Historical Perspective

The 1960s saw a "Dialogical Turn" in the determination of the relation of Christianity to other religions. This turn could be seen above all in the Roman Catholic church and the ecumenical movement.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) brought a far-reaching religious theology breakthrough. Until then, the official stance was that voiced by Cyprian: "extra ecclesiam nulla salus est." This word stood but was now supplemented by the formulation in the declaration *Nostra Aetate:* "The Catholic Church does not reject anything true and holy in these religions. Sincerely and seriously, it considers these forms of life and practice, these rules and teachings, which, though they may differ in some ways from that which she holds to be true and teaches, yet not seldom let us recognize a ray of that truth, which enlightens all people."

The last sentence references Joh 1:9: God's Word is "the true light that enlightens every human." The Catholic church was always worldwide and, as such, had always been in contact with other religions. That did not mean that she valued them theologically, but she nevertheless was sensitive to the need to determine the relation to the other religions.

With the Protestant churches, it was different. Traditionally, they were limited to middle and northern Europe and North America. There they encountered other Christian confessions, but rarely other religions. There was no need to determine the theological relation. That changed with the felt need to revise the relationship with Judaism. The relational form of dialogue should take the place of earlier models of differentiation and confrontation. That led to the insight that a revision of the determination of relation to Islam and other

religions was needed. The Jewish-Christian dialogue became the mother of interreligious dialogue.

In the ecumenical movement, the horizon widened: In 1961, the third general assembly of the WCC met in New Delhi, for the first time in the history of the WCC, not within the Western circle of culture but in the middle of the religious plurality of the Hindu tradition. Awareness spread that, according to Psalm 24:1, the *whole* earth – as suffering creation longing for salvation – is God's dwelling, that Jesus Christ is known (above all in Colossians) as the universal Christ of the *entire* cosmos, that the Spirit of God moves over *all* of creation. What did this mean for the theological view of other religions? Do they not belong to this "greater Ecumene"? The churches participating in New Delhi admitted having had in the past "little understanding for the wisdom, love, and power that God had given to the people of other religions and even those with no religion." In 1971 a program unit for interreligious dialogue was initiated.

From the outset, however, there were theological reservations, above all on the part of the Protestant churches and its evangelical wing: Does not openness to dialogue with other religions lead to a relativizing of Christian truth claims, to an illegitimate mingling of religions, to watering down, to filing down the corners and edges and thereby the profile of the Christian faith? A suspicion of syncretism was expressed. And where would it leave the "solus Christus" of the Reformation and the church's mission mandate?

Christology is the decisive point. In Catholic theology, it was possible to appeal to Johannine Logos theology; in the ecumenical movement, the cosmic Christology of Colossians. Protestant theology, by contrast, appealed strongly to Pauline theology and emphasized the soteriological meaning of Christ's death. In a nutshell: Protestant Christology orients itself less on the universal word of God and more on the particular soteriological event of the crucifixion of Jesus. From this alone comes salvation, which is mediated only by baptism and faith in Christ ("sola fide"). This results in a Christocentric theology, leading to a clear distancing from other religions. It was only in the 1980s and even more in the 1990s that this Christocentrism was placed in a larger Trinitarian theological context. As God's activity in creation and as Spirit were brought to the fore, there was theologically a better basis for openness to dialogue.

A second theological reason for the objections to interreligious dialogue that many Protestant churches had is found in the inheritance of the Reformation. Luther had used the justification doctrine – the distinction between law and gospel – as the fundamental difference to the Catholic Church, Judaism, and Islam. In one breath, he characterized the 'Papists,' the 'Jews,' and the 'Mohammedans' as representatives of a legalistic form of religion, which he contrasted with the liberating gospel of the gift of God's grace. With the differentiation between "gospel" and "law," two forms or ways of mediation between God and humans, that is, two ways of salvation, are contrasted:

- Gospel: Salvation through the pure, unmerited grace of God;
- Law: the attempt to save oneself through works righteousness, self-justification, and pious exertions.

Throughout the history of Protestantism, this differentiation has been applied in interpreting other religions – above all, Judaism and Islam. The label of legalism, which one applied to Judaism in the past, is now attached above all to Islam. The legalistic, demanding God who speaks in the Koran is not the mild God of Jesus Christ, according to an EKD paper "Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft" (Clarity and Good Neighbourliness, 2006). Therefore, it should not be permitted to say that Christians and Moslems pray to the same God.

At this time, I cannot present the current positions of the Protestant churches in Europe on religious plurality in general and Judaism and Islam in particular, as well as specific questions concerning church practice. Documents that appeared up to 2018 are included in the working paper "Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe."

2. Sociology of Religion Interpretations

From the diversity of interpretations offered by the sociology of religion, I will select that of Peter Berger, above all as he presented it in his book "The Many Altars of Modernity" (2014). According to Berger, two pluralisms exist side by side. There is a plurality of religions and the plurality of religious and secular discourse. The religious subject lives in a secular environment, conscious of religious alternatives. To put it another way: At present, religiosity always lives in relation to non-religion and other-religion. Religious subjects are never purely religious in thought or action but always secular and in reference to other religions as well. This reference can take on various forms of differentiation and integration. This representation means that religious views can no longer claim self-evident validity; they must always be justified anew.

In retrospect, Berger concedes that the secularization theory that he, too, had presented can no longer be sustained. Empirical evidence speaks against it. Religion asserts itself in the modern world, as seen above all in North American society. Even in non-Western societies, a push for modernization doesn't necessarily lead to a weakening of religion through secularization. And in Europe itself, the most secularized of all continents, religion does not want to give way. Thus, Berger considers it unavoidable to supplement, or perhaps even replace, the secularization theory with a pluralization theory.

Previously, Berger had concluded that religion could no longer be a normative orientation system recognized by society. As religiosity, it must be something that each religious individual takes responsibility for as their own choice. The compulsion of choice is part of religion. The omnipresence of other religious options – that is, a religious plurality – undermines the self-evident claim of a religion to be recognized as normative. That does not have

to lead to a loss of meaning, however. What we see at the moment is a transformation process, not a dissolution process.

In the secularization debate, we must differentiate between the macro-level of social systems and the micro-level of individually practiced religiosity. On the macro level, secularization relates to separating the system "religion" and its institutions from the other systems and institutions of society. On the micro-level, it relates to the loss of meaning practiced religion has in individuals' life orientation and conduct. It is incontestable that secularization processes have taken place on the macro-level (for instance, in the repression of religion from areas of societal function such as health or education, the standardization of modes of living or counselling). Contested, though, is how these changes should be interpreted on the micro-level: as loss of meaning of religion, as pluralization, or even the return or strengthening of religious commitment, whereas this strengthening doesn't affect institutional ecclesiastic religion but modes of free spirituality or of religious radicalism. For all these interpretations, one can produce evidence. Depending on which phenomena one places in the foreground of investigation, the interpretation of the religious landscape will be different.

The pluralization hypothesis can be associated with the premise of the retreat of religion or with the premise of a return of religion. In one case, it is imputed that pluralization or diversification of religious offerings stimulates demand. – Competition enlivens business. In the other case, it is claimed that the multioptionality neutralizes or relativizes each religious offering. For example, why go to services when that Buddhist meditation exercise is so attractive?

Berger observes that secularization movements on the macro-level of society don't necessarily lead to a loss of meaning of religion on the micro-level. They can also induce a counterreaction, in which individuals strengthen their religious attitudes, even as the institutions that propagate these attitudes (such as the churches) lose societal relevance. Through individualization, religion is not pushed out of the secular world but made compatible with it. It is not the traditional religion but the pluralized and individualized religion that thrives in late modern secularization.

3. Practical Challenges

In part three of my lecture, I will change the perspective and ask what religious diversity means for church practice. I will no longer deal with secularization or theories from the sociology of religion but with practical theology. I see ten challenges:

(1) Pastors[1] are frequently asked to perform and participate in a Christian-Muslim wedding. Many European churches have issued guidelines for this. Such weddings pose not only practical questions about the celebration of the ceremony but also theological questions. Among them is the understanding of marriage, counselling, and baptism or circumcision of the children.

(2) When catastrophe strikes and affects people with diverse religious affiliations, there are often interreligious memorial services. What should be considered in the preparation and conduct of such services?

(3) Many schools open or close the year with worship services. Would it not be good, in order to involve non-Christian students, to hold interreligious services, for instance, Jewish–Christian–Moslem?

(4) The entire area of spiritual care in hospitals, prisons, refugee shelters, and the military is affected. How do we deal with adherents of other religions in these institutions? Can or should the pastor look after them, too? Should spiritual representatives of other faiths take care of their own? Should there be interreligious spiritual care?

(5) Many airports, train stations, and shopping malls have multireligious rooms for prayer and worship. How should they be furnished and operated?

(6) Can or should there be interreligious prayer – say for peace or other concerns that transcend specific religions? What would such ceremonies look like? How should the prayers be formulated? To be spoken in unison or in such a way that each participating religious community should offer its prayer? Are such prayers addressed to the same God?

(7) In the ministry of charity (Diakonia) – say, in senior centres or nursing homes – there is an increasing number of non-Christian residents. What does this mean for spiritual care?

(8) How should we deal with Muslim refugees who seek baptism?

(9) From time to time, representatives of religious communities are invited to join in discussions about organizing civic life and local politics. Many cities have well-established interreligious councils or forums. In Birmingham, for instance, this is a well-established practice. But, of course, the representatives of the church are just one voice among many.

(10) Occasionally, congregations are asked whether they would allow the use of their church social hall for a Muslim event. Or they may be asked to support the request of a Muslim community that the cemetery would set aside a section for Muslim burials. There might also be discussion of whether a congregation would allow a Muslima who wears a head covering

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[1] From the translator: In the German, Professor Bernhardt used here the masculine and feminine forms; unfortunately, to my knowledge, there is no equivalent in English of that; both are "pastors." To make it clear one is speaking inclusively, one might say "women and men in ministry."

to be employed in a church-sponsored Kindergarten. If so, could she observe Ramadan together with Muslim children?

And so on.

Each of these requests presents a new challenge for a congregation and will likely lead to controversy. To clarify the questions they raise, we need not only practical help but also theological reflection. Unfortunately, some of the help offered by the church so far has been controversial. In particular conservative and evangelical (in the sense of fundamentalist) wings of the church rebel whenever they feel an essential point of Christian faith is abandoned in the name of syncretism and relativism.

I take up just one of the questions from this catalogue, one that has led to burning theological debate and continues to: the question of joint prayer by Christians and Moslems. According to traditional Christian understanding, Christian prayer is spoken to God in the name of Jesus Christ. Christ is not the addressee of the prayer, but the mediator to God, the intercessor, so to speak, who carries the prayer to God. A Muslim spiritual representative, however, would not find it possible to utter a prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. At the same time, a Christian pastor[2] might have difficulty addressing a prayer to Allah, even when she knows that "Allah" is simply the Arabic word for "God" and that Arabic-speaking Christians use it. She might have even more difficulty with the moralism carried by Muslim prayers, in that they are primarily concerned with proper conduct, not seldomly with the promise of reward and the threat of punishment in the afterlife.

To avoid wounding religious sensibilities on both sides, it is preferable to distinguish between interreligious and multireligious prayer and to give preference to multireligious prayer. *Inter*religious prayer is jointly formulated and spoken by Christians and Moslems. They could be freely formulated or compilations of texts from both traditions. *Multi*religious prayer, by contrast, is not spoken jointly. Instead, a representative of each tradition speaks while the other is attentive in silent meditation. Thus, representatives of each tradition don't simultaneously speak the same thing, but one after another, with different words.

When churches take a position, it is often decidedly in favour of this second form – side-by-side – and criticize the first – praying together. They usually base this on the consideration that in multireligious prayer, one's own tradition can be uttered more authentically instead of agreeing to the lowest common denominator of an abstract faith in God.

I thoroughly understand this argument and would approve of multireligious prayer as a rule. However, based on the Protestant freedom of conscience, it appears essential to me not to make a law out of this. There may well be situations where participants feel the need to formulate a common prayer and, in this way, express their commitment to the one God more deeply. Especially in coming to grips with a catastrophe, but also when celebrating a

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[2] From the translator: In the German, Professor Bernhardt used here the feminine form, "Pfarrerin."

wedding, this form of common prayer can be fitting, as long as it doesn't wound the sensitivities of all who take part. Indeed, the sensitivity for the presence of God in the jointly experienced situation can be brought to expression in praise and lament. In Protestant understanding, questions of the formulation are always secondary. Not the form but the content of what is prayed is central. Not the formulation is decisive, but the opening of hearts for the healing presence of God. For proper prayer, it's not decisive that the participants are Christians but that the prayer takes place in a radical movement of openness to God so that one can no longer say who is praying: I or God's Spirit in me. When, however, a prayer is spoken in a spirit of religious self-righteousness, it *contradicts* that spirit, no matter how fervently it is prayed in the name of Jesus. *Content* is more important than *form*. More important still is the *attitude* of the one who prays. The promise in Psalm 145:18 is clear enough to leave no doubt: "The LORD is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth[3]." Who would like to insinuate that a Moslem cannot pray as uprightly as a Christian?

A declaration of the KEK/CCEE puts it thus: "... we cannot force the Spirit of God to conform to our theological thinking! Therefore, the possibility of praying together does not depend on theoretical agreement about a common perception of God. God's reality goes far beyond our human understanding ... In the end, it is to the grace and mercy of God that Christian and Muslim address their prayers. So, we trust in Him that He can bring together Christians and Muslims if they pray in deep concern and great gratitude."[4]

Behind these considerations of the question of joint prayers stands a question that is as simple as it is central: whether Christians and Moslems pray to the same God. I don't wish to pursue this question further at the moment. Yet it poses one of the many theological challenges brought about by the presence of other religions, particularly Islam. For example, were we to say with Karl Barth, "the god of Mohammed is an idol just like all other idols, and the idea that Christianity and Islam can be grouped as 'monotheistic' religions rests on an optical illusion,"[5] then there can be no common prayer with Moslems to this God. So, you see how closely preliminary theological decisions hang together with forms of church and interreligious practice.

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[3] From the translator: Revised Standard Version. Where the English text reads "in truth," the German text would be translated "uprightly."

[4] Christians and Muslims praying together. Reflections and texts. Study paper, April 2003, prepared by the „Islam and Europe" Committee of the Council of European Bishop's Conferences (CCEE) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC), S.7.

[5] Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesdienst nach reformatorischer Lehre, Zollikon 1938, 57.

With this, I've arrived at the fourth and final part of my lecture, in which I turn to the systematic theological foundation of determining the relation to other relations that, in principle, values them.

4. Theology of the Religions

In the working paper I mentioned at the outset, "Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe," we undertook the attempt to offer a *theological* determination of the relationship to other religions from the point of view of Protestant faith. Its central thought involved pointing to God's radical grace, the foundational confession of Protestant churches, as unfolded in the teaching of justification. The fundamental conviction of Protestant faith is that there is no condition on the human side to being gifted with this grace. It is rooted alone in God. The Latin expression for root is "radix," from which we also have the word "radical." If this grace has no conditions, then that includes the condition of membership in a given religious community.

It follows from the insight that God's grace is radical, rooted alone in God, that it is universal (Psalm 33:5; 119:64). God's grace extends to the heavens, as far as the clouds (Psalm 36). "For the grace of God has appeared to the salvation of all humans" (Titus 2:11).

The working paper expresses it thus: "Whoever is committed to the universality of God's grace is compelled to not limit God's saving actions to the boundaries of Christian religion. This grace was present before religion appeared in history and is active beyond the zone of religious influence. It undercuts not only ethnic, social, and cultural partitions but also religious ones."[6]

God's radical grace is not only an affirmative principle but a critical one. Wherever a form of religion makes itself absolute and thereby no longer differentiates between God's truth, which is always beyond us, and its conception of that truth, wherever a religion ties its members to a *religion* rather than pointing away from itself to God, then it deserves to be criticized in the name of God's radical grace. This tendency to religious egocentricity, to make its religious truth absolute, exists in all religions. Therefore, they must constantly be reminded that they are not light from God's light but have the task of making themselves transparent for this light.

The basic confession of God's radical grace is unfolded in a three-fold, Trinitarian way in the working paper: creative, saving, and inspiring grace.[7]

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[6] Note of translator: Please compare this translation to that of the official document (https://www.leuenberg.eu/product/protestant-perspectives-on-religious-plurality-in-europe/), which I haven't consulted.

[7] In the following summary, I will depart from the presentation of the working paper and present my

(a) The basic thought of God's radical grace lies in the first article of the Credo: faith in God, who is not the tribal God of Jews and Christians but the foundation and goal of all creation. The realm of his sovereignty extends through the entire cosmos, all of history, and therefore all the history of religion. Each human – independent of his religious loyalty – must be seen as a creation and therefore be treated with the appropriate dignity. When Paul confesses, according to Acts 17:27, "Yet he is not far from each of us," he is referring to all of humankind. Therefore, the universality of God, as the foundation of all reality and all history (and therefore all history of religion), compels the thought that God is in a relationship with all religions and can express his presence through its means.

(b) The basic thought of God's radical grace is expressed in the second article of the Credo: in the faith in Jesus Christ as the personal presence of the divine will to salvation.

Seen from the theology of religion, the central question in Christology is whether the creative, saving, and inspiring presence of God is tied to the *name* of Jesus Christ and thereby to faith in Christ (as Karl Barth, for instance, emphasized), or whether it is definitively represented or revealed in Christ, but can also be experienced where humans are not professing Christians (as Tillich, for example, taught). The second of these Christological ways of thought makes it possible to expect God's saving action outside the sphere of influence of the proclamation of Christ. I subscribe to the second interpretation and advance the thesis that the presence of God was indeed definitively represented (revealed) in Jesus Christ but is not tied exclusively to the confession to Christ. It can be *identified* with reference to Christ, which does not mean that it is only found there.

According to Matt 7:21, Jesus expressly does not tie the relationship to God to his person: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Were it otherwise – were the relationship to God tied to a given Credo or allegiance to a religion, then it would be conditional. The foundational thought of Protestant theology is that God gives his grace unconditionally, with no condition on the side of humans, which in turn means the condition of allegiance to a particular religion or Credo. We can expect, accordingly, that God's saving presence was manifested before the coming of Jesus Christ and outside of the sphere of influence of the Christian message. God desires all humans to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

Over and over, we see in the NT that Jesus Christ differentiates himself from God. He does not make himself absolute but points beyond himself – to God, the coming of God's kingdom, and God's salvation. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone," we read in Mark 10:18 (see also Mark 13:32, Matt 20:23). Paul heralds the end-time subjection of the Son to the Father, "that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15:28). In the Gospel of John, the difference between Father and Son is expressed through the motif of sending and return (so, for instance, in John 5:30; 10:30; 12:44f. 49; 16:5a, 17:3b, 18a.21b.25; 20:17).

interpretation.

Christ came *in the name of God* (John 5:43). His relationship to God and humans consists in mediation, in which the mediator does not seek his own glory but the glory of the One who sent him (John 8:50) and on whom he depends (John 5:19ff; 10:29; 14:24b.28; 17:1ff.). In Christ, the nature of God is *revealed*. Jesus lived in the most intensive immediacy of God but did not identify himself with God, which would also have been – and still is – unthinkable for a Jew. When his opponents charge him with making himself equal to God, he denies it emphatically (John 5:18).

Jesus Christ is the central and normative point of connection of Christian faith. But that does not mean God's grace is exclusively mediated through faith in Christ. Normativity and universality do not denote exclusivity. Hebrews 1:1 speaks of an authentic revelation of God before Jesus Christ and that God has spoken "to us," that is, to Christians, through Jesus Christ, his Son. One can say then with Hans Kessler: "from a Christian point of view, the self-revelation of God is *concentrated* in the person of Jesus, but is not *limited* to it."

The World Mission and Evangelism conference in San Antonio 1989 declared: "We confess that for us, there is no other path to salvation other than that opened through Jesus Christ. But, at the same time, we cannot set boundaries to the saving power of God."

There can be healthy relationships with God that are not mediated through Jesus Christ. Indeed, there must be if God's saving will is unconditional and universal, as Jesus taught and lived. This certainty nourished the expectation that in religions, there are formations of God's grace to be discovered that are, according to Christian conviction, decisively and definitively personified in Christ. There lies in this not only a practical and ethical motive but a theological one to engage in encounters with those of other faiths.

(c) The basic thought of God's radical grace is expressed in the third article of the Credo: faith in the Spirit of God, which encompasses and saturates all creation. God's Spirit is the power of his presence. According to Biblical testimony, this power is creative and healing/saving. It brings forth life, awakens faith, love, and hope; it endows reconciliation, understanding, and community; it inspires, enlightens, and opens knowledge horizons. The Spirit transmits and assures the truth of faith and leads to encounters with people of other orientations of faith and existence. If the power of God's spirit is omnipresent – the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8) – then religions, too, cannot be excluded from that. Although it's not possible to determine precisely how this presence of the Spirit manifests itself in religions, it is safe to assume that it is at work wherever love (that is, the overcoming of self-centeredness) appears, wherever existence supporting designs of meaning that orient life, with its foundation and goal, is conveyed, wherever inhumane conventions and structures are broken up, wherever new possibilities of life open, and so on.

That God's Spirit can also waft through other religions in no way implies that it is encountered in every form of religion. Indeed, much is baneful in the supposed paths to salvation in the religions, including Christianity.[8]

My balance at the end of these theological considerations can be brief: One often hears the opinion that openness to encounter with adherents of other religions stands in tension with faithfulness to one's religion. It was as if it were a form of religious adultery, a giving up of one's identity, a watering down of one's profile. I assert the opposite: that openness to interreligious dialogue is a genuine expression of Christian faith. Relationships in dialogue, interreligious solidarity, and hospitality correspond to the principle of the unconditional love of neighbour. God's universal and unconditional will to save also extends to the adherents of other religions and, therefore, over the religions themselves. Such theological openness does not lead to watering down one's faith; instead, it can effect a deepening of it. Interreligious companionship can lead to a deeper consciousness of the paths of each and not to a mixture of those paths. By shutting off others, the churches give up the opportunity that lies in openness for religious plurality. As I see it, this opportunity consists, above all, in the possibility of escaping narrow religious straits through constructive exchange with other religions and seeing that the divine foundation of all being is vaster than can be conceived if one ties God's will to save and his saving activity exclusively to Christ and Christian faith.[9]

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[8] Note of translator: Professor Bernhardt uses a play on words involving the German word that conveys the meanings holy, salvific, and healthy (Heil). Baneful is "Unheilvoll" and the paths to salvation are "Heilswegen."

[9] For further information on these topics, permit me to refer to some of my books: *Inter-Religio. Das Christentum in Beziehung zu anderen Religionen* (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen 16), Zürich 2019; *Klassiker der Religionstheologie im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Historische Studien als Impulsgeber für die heutige Reflexion* (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen 20), Zürich 2020; *Jesus Christus – Repräsentant Gottes. Christologie im Kontext der Religionstheologie* (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen 23), Zürich 2021.