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On Being a Servant of Reconciliation

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My commitment to pursue a deeper understanding of Muslims and Islam, their culture and religion, developed gradually during the years 1957 to 1961 when I was studying Christian theology at the universities of Bonn and Tübingen. From 1959 I worked under the guidance of the church historian Hubert Jedin on an extended paper entitled “The China Missions in the Middle Ages.” One day by chance I came across the essay “The Need for Islamic Studies” by the Dutch Jesuit J. J. Houben, then professor of Islamology at Nijmegen (Holland) and Beirut (Lebanon). The following statement, made in the context of discussing the importance of a renewal of religious thought in contemporary Islam, impressed me:

Not only the missionaries working in Muslim countries but every Catholic throughout the world must realize that the fate of hundreds of millions of Muslims hangs in the balance and that in order to help them to solve the difficulties along religious lines, a deeper knowledge of their mentality and of Islam in general as a religion and as a polity is certainly one of the most pressing needs for the Catholics of our times.
(Ibid., 191)

Soon after reading Houben's essay I managed to meet him in person. He stressed that a proper study of Arabic and of Islam was quite demanding. Hence I should think twice before embarking on this road. I persisted. The following morning Houben entrusted me with a letter addressed to my archbishop, Josef Cardinal Frings of Cologne, in which he proposed that I should be allowed special studies in Arabic and Islam. I was to deliver this letter to the cardinal during my first official encounter with him in June 1961 on the occasion of the completion of my university studies in preparation for the priesthood. The cardinal, to my surprise, immediately expressed his agreement with Fr. Houben's proposal. For some time now, he said, I have been feeling the need for a priest of the archdiocese to get thoroughly acquainted with the Christians and Muslims of the Middle East. For this the solid knowledge of Arabic was needed, and since Arabic was a difficult language, I should learn it as soon as possible. So, the cardinal sent me, exactly as Fr. Houben had proposed in his letter, to the Centre Religieux d' Études Arabes (CREA), the language school attached to the Université Saint Joseph, Beirut, situated at Bikfaya, then a small, relatively remote township about nineteen miles north-east of Beirut, about 2,600 feet above sea level on the western slopes of Mount Lebanon.

My motivation for going beyond the boundaries of normal Catholic theological studies was missionary. From the time of my first Holy Communion at the age of ten, on the Sunday after Easter 1947, I had felt a calling to serve God in a special way. This calling persisted somehow throughout the following years; it moved me, after completing my Abitur, to ask to be admitted as a seminarian, which in the Archdiocese of Cologne meant living in a college with other candidates for the priesthood as a student of the Faculty of Catholic Theology of Bonn University.

However, the Church worldwide, "the missions," had begun to interest me much earlier. My father was an internationally known geographer at Bonn University. We children, nine sisters and brothers, were regularly present when geographer colleagues, friends, and acquaintances of my parents, would share lunch or dinner with our family. The blessing and thanksgiving that my father recited at the beginning and end of each meal, was said equally in the presence of guests who obviously did not share our Christian faith. Over the years this made me think and ask questions.

The library at home spread over the corridors and along the staircases of the house. From the walls fascinating book titles as well as geographical maps carried

my imagination to far-off continents. At the same time, almost daily, I served as an altar boy in the parish church and loved singing in the city's Bach Choir. One day, at the age of thirteen, I told my parents that I would like to train as a missionary. Thus I came to spend several years in two grammar schools. In the first, which was run by the Missionaries of the Divine Word, I lived as a boarder; the other, run by the Redemptorists, I attended as a day boy. My ideal was to serve somewhere in the worldwide Church. In both schools the regular practice of liturgical and personal prayer as well as meditation on Holy Scripture played a central role and we had countless opportunities to learn about far-off countries. To this day I vividly remember occasions when missionaries on furlough from Asia and Africa, with the help of slides and other visual aids, talked to us with fascination about the people and country they had adopted.

Not yet decided upon the concrete path towards realizing my ideals, I began with the study of Catholic theology at Bonn University. From the beginning of these studies I frequented additional lecture courses and seminars offered by Protestant theologians and by historians of religion. Two years into my university studies, during my three semesters at Tübingen University (1959-60), I took the initiative of founding at the Catholic chaplaincy, a circle of students from overseas. They were studying in various faculties of the university. Many of them were Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. We met every week during semester-time in a private home. One of us would give a talk about a topic of interest usually related to her or his home country, culture or religion. These meetings and those I encountered made a lasting impression on me.

About that time I decided to commence the study of Arabic. Having gained access to the primary sources of Christianity and Judaism through Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, I wanted to get to know Arabic and the religion of Islam that meant so much to a number of my student friends from abroad. I joined a small group of first-semester students of Islamic studies. Prof. Rudi Paret, already then quite well-known as an outstanding scholar of Islam, initiated us personally into Arabic script and basic grammar. It was through him that I heard for the first time about such great scholars of Arabic and Islam as Theodor Nöldeke, Carl Brockelmann, and Gerhard Ritter, and also about such groups of Christian believers among Muslims as the Little Brothers of Jesus, founded in 1933 in the Sahara by René Voillaume, based on the rule formulated by Charles de Foucauld (d. 1916), the Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes of

the White Fathers at Tunis, and the Trappist Monastery of Thiberine in the Atlas mountains of Algeria.

Back in Bonn I happened to listen to a talk by the Benedictine scholar of religions and of Christian missions, Thomas Ohm of the University of Münster, about the need for a renewal of missionary practice and thought. In a booklet entitled *Muslime und Katholiken* (München: Kösel, 1961) published at that time he argued the need for a “new spirit” in living and acting together with the Muslims.

The spirit that the Christians need in the mission to Islam is not the spirit of enmity, of dominance, of arrogance, of antipathy, but rather the spirit of friendship, brotherliness, sympathy, understanding - the Holy Spirit of Agape. Who goes to the Muslims, should go as Peter may have gone on his mission, after he had denied his Lord three times, hence he should go conscious that the Christians in the past have made many mistakes. In the end it will be crucial to omit or do nothing without the Love of God and neighbor (1 Cor. 13:7f). (Ohm, 9 and 85)

Arabic in Lebanon, the Novitiate, Philosophy, and Vatican II

With regard to the “quest for the Muslims and their Islam” I consider the two years of intensive study of Arabic (through the medium of French) in Mount Lebanon (1961-63) the most formative period in my life. We formed a group of about fifteen biennium students. Most of them were Jesuit scholastics from the Netherlands and France. I was the only German. Looking back, I consider the two years in Mount Lebanon, separated from home, secluded from city life, and fully concentrated on the intricacies of Arabic grammar and style, the novitiate as it were of my life in the service of Christian-Muslim understanding. The discipline this biennium demanded and the effort to give the best of ourselves to the study of Arabic, about ten hours every day, were accompanied by weekly excursions up into the mountains or down to the sea-shore, by frequent visits to families in the nearby villages and to monastic communities in the vicinity of Bikfaya. We also began to understand, through reading the local press, the complexities of Near Eastern politics, all this in a Lebanon that, although politically already in a somewhat precarious situation, was still considered then “the Switzerland of the Near East.”

The founder and spirit of the Centre Religieux d' études Arabes was Père André d'Alverny, S.J. (d. 1965), professor of Arabic literature at the Institut Oriental de l'Université St Joseph. He was assisted by Père Louis Pouzet, S.J. (d. 2002), who later succeeded d'Alverny as professor of Arabic literature at the same university and who is the author of outstanding works on Yahya an-Nawawi's (d. 1277) *Al-Arba'in* and on the religious life of thirteenth-century Damascus. Our language tutors were specially trained Lebanese schoolteachers.

This intensive and demanding effort to enter into the world of Arabic, together with the first encounter with central foundational texts of Islam in the Arabic original, left a lasting impression on me and has shaped my later encounter with Muslims and their culture and faith. The daily celebration of the Eucharist in the Melkite or in the Maronite rite helped to give these two years a religious and ascetic quality.

In the summer of 1962, after my first year in Lebanon, while staying in a village of the Biqa plain to learn spoken Lebanese, I gained the certainty that I was to ask to be received into the Society of Jesus. But first I was told by the Jesuit provincial of the Near East that I should finish the course in Arabic for which the Archbishop of Cologne had sent me to Lebanon and complete it with the *Diplôme de Langue Arabe* of the Université St. Joseph, Beirut. When I returned from Lebanon to Germany, I entered the Jesuit novitiate in Westphalia and this was followed in Bavaria by two years of studying for the licentiate in philosophy.

The thirty days' Ignatian retreat during the novitiate acquainted me with the mechanism of discernment in spiritual matters. Ignatian discernment asks: What does God want of me in a concrete situation, in circumstances that are not clear and where reflection and conclusions do not result in a clear answer? The method of such discernment includes total openness (indifference) in the face of God and of all reality. It leads the person gradually into a real encounter with the Jesus of the Gospels who enables the seeker to assess the movements in his or her soul by the criterion of his life and spirit. I discovered in the course of time that the critical openness for God's spirit at work in a given movement and its teachings - when applied *mutatis mutandis* to the world of living religions - definitely can help in trying to discern in the attitudes or teachings of such a movement the presence of "good" or "evil" spirits. Viewed in the perspective of Ignatian spiritual pedagogies for instance, the a priori, clear-cut dividing of the world of lived religions into natural and supernatural or into

clearly evil/erroneous and clearly good/true realms, looked at from this perspective, turned out to be too simplistic. Such a view of things does not take sufficient account of the fact that in the perspective of Christian faith all reality, not least that of lived religions and cultures, is marked by signs of the Holy Spirit as well as by signs of the absence or opposition to this Holy Spirit. In addition, the study of philosophy made me convinced of the need, in the effort to understand religious traditions - one's own as well as others - to define concepts clearly and avoid tearing statements out of their context.

Spiritually and theologically the process of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its final documents turned out to be crucial for the whole of my later engagement with Muslims and Islam. At the time of the announcement of the council by Pope John XXIII, on January 25, 1959, I was still pursuing my theological studies at Bonn University. Hubert Jedin, the well-known historian of the Council of Trent and later a key advisor to Pope John XXIII in organizing Vatican II, was my main tutor at that time. Immediately after the announcement of the council, "prophetically" he impressed upon us students the extraordinary impact this council would make on the future life of the Church. Lecture courses and personal contact with two other *periti* of the council, Joseph Ratzinger at Bonn and Hans Küng at Tübingen, brought the inner-Catholic wrestling with fundamental questions of *aggiornamento* close to my attention. This made me ask analogous questions regarding the development of contemporary Islam.

The importance of the documents of the council for any Catholic working in the post-Vatican II period in the field of Christian-Muslim relations is obvious. Texts like paragraph 16 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*); the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), especially its paragraph 3, and, last but not least, the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) became for me firm points of reference and a constant source of motivation. I personally, however, was especially impressed by Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam* of August 6, 1964. The key elements emerging for me from Paul VI's and the council's teaching on interreligious dialogue were these: reciprocal communication, mutual friendship, and respect, as well as a joint effort for the sake of shared goals, all in the service of a common search for the fuller realization of the truth.

London and South Asia

During the first half of 1966, towards the end of my licentiate course in philosophy, I asked to be sent to work as a member of the Jesuit community in Lahore, Pakistan in order to engage in the study of Muslim culture and in interreligious dialogue in the spirit of Vatican II. In preparation, in the autumn of 1966, I went to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and began with a BA (honors) course in Urdu Language and Literature. The honors course included the study of classical Persian and of medieval and modern Indian history. These years culminated in my PhD thesis and subsequent book: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98): A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978; Karachi: OUP, 1979).

Early in 1976 I moved from London not to Lahore but to New Delhi. The Jesuit superior general wanted me to teach Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations at the Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies, the Jesuit Faculty of Theology in Delhi. In this way I was to be of help to the Indian Church in the effort of entering into dialogical relations not only with the Hindus but also with the Muslims of India and their Islam.

The decade in London from 1966–76 was a period of intensive study and encounter with Muslims, most of them from South Asia. The first two years were dedicated almost entirely to acquiring basic language skills in Urdu and Persian. The Urdu course was designed to enable the student, practically from the beginning, to converse with Urdu speakers. I spent many weekends in Urdu-speaking homes practicing the language, talking about South Asian Muslim tradition, reading Urdu poetry or listening to its recitation, and watching Urdu videos and films. It was exciting thus to enter into the world of Indian and Pakistani Muslims. As far as Persian is concerned I remained on the level of reading texts of classical works of historiography and literature and of Sufism in the original. For four years my main tutor in Urdu was Ralph Russell, an outstanding teacher, together with Khaled Hasan Qadiri and Dr. Timur Gandjei. During those years I also had the opportunity of spending several extended summer holidays reading selected classical Sufi texts in Arabic and Persian under the personal guidance of the outstanding scholar of classical Sufism, Richard Gramlich, S.J.

Surely, there were times during this long period of preparatory immersion into the world of South-Asian Muslims in London and South Asia - at a relatively advanced student age - when I felt stretched and became impatient. But my curiosity and fascination with the languages of Urdu and Persian and with the whole South-Asian Muslim universe that these languages and literatures opened up to me, carried me on. The British academic system allowed me to spend a whole year of my course traveling on my own in Iran, Afghanistan, and South Asia, visiting Muslim scholars and institutions, and finally taking tutorials with Urdu scholars in Lahore, whom I had met at the University of London earlier. During my years of doctoral research under the intensive guidance of the historian of South Asia, Dr. Peter Hardy, again I was able to travel to Pakistan and India, meeting scholars knowledgeable in the field of my research and frequenting the relevant libraries in Aligarh, Rampur, and Patna.

Reflecting on this period now I notice that my priestly ordination in July 1971 did not alter my desire to spend all my energy in the study of Islam and in frequent personal encounters with Muslims. However, being sent to give myself to this task as an ordained priest of the Church not only strengthened my sense of commitment but also gave me the knowledge of doing this work in the name of the local and universal Church. The Church, by assigning me as an ordained priest to this work, had committed herself to the task of intensive Christian-Muslim dialogue. So, for example, studying a Muslim text possibly for weeks or spending whole weekends discussing with educated Muslims trends in contemporary Islamic thought, I considered to be an expression of my priestly apostolate. These activities - including, for example, the learning of a language like Turkish relatively late in life - constituted for me one and the same process of being drawn ever more deeply into a presence, an encounter to which I had been empowered and sent officially by my religious order and thus by the Church. I have never lost this sense over the years. Meeting Muslims and thus Islam at a deep level, I consider to be my way of participating as a priest in the larger and centuries-old encounter between Church and Mosque. In and from the regular encounter with the Lord in the daily celebration of the Eucharist, I receive the motivation and strength needed to follow on his way.

The greatest gift of the years that I spent teaching and researching in London and then in Delhi and many other parts of India, I consider to be the lasting friendships with a number of Muslims who represent to me some of the finest qualities of

Indo-Muslim culture and religion. I can mention here only a few of them: Syed Wahiduddin (1909-98) who over the years conveyed to me a unique synthesis of Hindu and Muslim philosophy, modern Western thought, Sufi wisdom and contemporary Christian theology. Syed Wahiduddin made me understand and appreciate essential aspects of the Qur'anic idea of God and of the meanings of Islamic prayer. Then Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi, the accomplished scholar of English and Urdu literature, Muhammad Ishaq Khan, the outstanding scholar of Sufism, past and present, in the Kashmiri environment, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, the remarkable leader of the Al-Risala movement, these and many others - among whom especially those who collaborated with me for the book series *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries* - became dear and esteemed colleagues.

But of course in Delhi my main assignment was to introduce the Catholic students of theology to Islam, to Indian Muslim culture and to the encounter and dialogue of Muslims and Christians. Already at my priestly ordination in 1971, I had chosen the motto from the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "Servant of Reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Now in India I saw myself being called in some small way to help the Church in her task of promoting reconciliation between the worlds of Hinduism and of Islam.

Soon after arriving in India in 1976, I met Fr. Paul Jackson, S.J., in Patna/Bihar who, inspired by the late Fr. Vincent Courtois, S.J., of Calcutta, was engaged already in the study of Islam and the dialogue with Muslims. We began in 1977 to meet regularly and eventually formed JAMI, a group of Jesuits Among Muslims in India, which in 1983 became ISA, the Islamic Studies Association. During the same year we founded the quarterly publication *SALAAM*, which is now in its thirtieth year of publication. The small group of Indian Catholics organized in ISA, made it possible to maintain the vision, and to pursue the work, of initiating dialogue at various levels - contacts as neighbors in everyday life, teaching and publishing, discussing questions of common social, cultural and religious interest and so on - within an environment that was and remains largely uninterested, if not at times hostile to it, because reaching out deliberately to the Muslims was seen then (not only by Hindus and Sikhs but also by many Indian Christians) as weakening enculturation of Christian life in Hindu culture and religion.

On the international level, from 1975 onwards I participated in almost all the meetings of the *Journées Romaines*. These meetings, from 1956 onwards for nearly half a century, were held every two years in Rome (or, as often later, in its vicinity). They allowed hundreds of Christians to reflect on the theological, spiritual, sociological, and cultural dimensions of their dialogue with Muslim friends. It was a meeting of Catholics (and an increasing number of Christians from other traditions) who in different parts of the world practiced and promoted Christian-Muslim encounter in the spirit of Vatican II. Maurice Borrmans, who for decades has been one of the outstanding figures of Christian-Muslim dialogue, in a recent essay rightly describes the *Journées Romaines* as “a school of formation and a place of information” in this field.¹ At the *Journées Romaines* I developed personal contacts with such key figures in Christian-Muslim relations as Jacques Jomier, Georges Anawati, Robert Caspar, and Louis Gardet, and I was able to feel the pulse of Christian-Muslim dialogue worldwide.

Back in Europe

In 1988 the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, officially invited me to join its staff. David Kerr, the founder of the center, had left England to take up the directorship of the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut as well as the editorship of the renowned quarterly *The Muslim World*. In the study center at the Selly Oak Colleges, Muslims and Christians together engaged in studying, teaching, and researching in the field of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Its academic courses and exams formed part of the program of the Faculty of Theology of Birmingham University and included undergraduate and postgraduate courses, up to the level of PhD. At the same time the center offered in the Midlands and beyond training courses and study sessions to Muslims and Christians who in their pastoral and social activities were in need of

¹ Maurice Borrmans, “Les ‘Journées Romaines’ et le Dialogue Islamo-Chretien.” *Islamochristiana* 30 (2004): 111–22, esp. Conclusion on p. 121.

knowledge about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. The center's activity and concern thus had both a worldwide and a local dimension.

In India, at Vidyajyoti Institute, as well as at various other faculties and seminaries throughout the country, I had been teaching students of Christian theology, introducing them to Islamic faith and practice, South Asian Islam and Christian-Muslim relations past and present. For all of these students the courses on Islam and on Christian-Muslim relations were of relatively marginal importance. Regrettably they had neither the time nor the languages, let alone a sufficiently strong motivation, to go deeper into the study of Muslim culture and Islam. Now, at Selly Oak, I was working as part of a team of Christian and Muslim colleagues, teaching students graduate and postgraduate courses as well as directing PhD theses. This new challenge attracted and motivated me considerably. At Selly Oak I entered naturally into regular conversation with religiously educated young Muslim women and men hailing from different parts of the world, where Christians and Muslims together were trying to enter into meaningful dialogical relations with one another. Staff and students at Selly Oak were united in the effort to deepen their own and one another's understanding of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations, in the framework of a common academic undertaking. So, for example, I was able to teach a one-year course called "The development of Islamic religious thought from the Qur'an to our time" in close collaboration with the eminent Pakistani scholar Dr. Khalid Alawi (d. 2008). This turned out to be a refreshing and satisfying experience for me in both human and academic terms. Also, initiating together with my Muslim and Christian colleagues on the staff at Selly Oak a new international biannual journal (later to become quarterly), *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, brought me into regular contact and intellectual exchange with Muslim and Christian scholars of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations the world over. And last but not least, in and from Birmingham, one of the important centers of Muslim immigration in Britain, I began to learn rapidly and in concrete ways about the problems Muslim immigration to Great Britain posed for local and national politics, for the Muslim communities themselves as well as for the Christian churches.

In 1993 I was asked by my superiors to take up a professorship at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, an academic institution mainly dedicated to teaching and research about the Oriental Churches. The main reason for asking me to move

to Rome was to enable me to go regularly - in the name of the Pontifical Gregorian University Consortium - as exchange guest professor to the University of Ankara's İlahiyat Fakültesi. A Turkish professor from the Ankara Faculty would teach on aspects of Islamic culture and faith at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and in return I would give lectures and seminars on Christian and Christian-Muslim themes at the Ankara faculty, and from there, as it turned out, sporadically in a number of other Muslim theological faculties. I taught at the Ankara faculty over a period of nine years, on each occasion for one to two months. After having been engaged in India and in England in explaining aspects of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations to Christians, especially students of Christian theology, I was asked now to do the opposite, namely to explain aspects of Christian faith and practice, such as the biblical scriptures and the history of the Christian Churches and of their relationship with Islam, to Muslims. Frequently I was also asked to discuss more recent Christian developments such as the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation, the Christian responses to the Enlightenment and to modern, critical scholarship, the ecumenical movement and the First (1869–70) as well as the Second Vatican Councils.

Eagerly I took advantage of the opportunity to learn Turkish. At the well-known TÖMER Institute for Turkish Language at the University of Ankara I found myself learning Turkish from scratch, in the company of Students - most of them some thirty-five or even forty years younger than myself - hailing mainly from Central Asia and from the Caucasus region. In these and countless other fascinating ways I was able to approach yet another great geographical and cultural region of the Islamic world, different from, and yet also in many ways related to, the world of Arab and of South Asian Islam that had hosted me earlier.

Also in 1993 I was appointed a member of the subcommission for Religious Relations of the Catholic Church with Islam of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome. The annual working sessions of this body to which I was privileged to belong for twelve years, usually stretched over several days of extended exchanges and conversations. The ongoing shared study projects and dialogue initiatives of this group took me into many different parts of the Muslim-Christian world. It also gave me the immeasurable gift of getting to know personally, and interacting regularly with, a number of female and male fellow believers, committed like myself

to living among Muslims, to Christian-Muslim encounter as well as to protracted study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. The same holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, of my membership in the subcommission for Interreligious Dialogue of the German Bishops' Conference, since 1999 and my regular collaboration with CIBEDO, the German Bishops' Institute at Sankt Georgen in Frankfurt (Main) for Christian-Muslim Encounter and Documentation.

Right from the beginning of my guest lecturing in Ankara for the Pontifical Gregorian University I had an idea at the back of my mind that one day, upon my eventual return to Germany, my acquaintance with Turkey and its language might be of significant help in mediating between the majority population and Turkish immigrants. This thought from 1993 onwards provided me with additional motivation to enter the world of Turkish language and culture. And in fact, in 1999 I did return to Germany, first to the Catholic Academy of Berlin, where I established the Forum for Christian-Muslim Dialogue. There I became acquainted with a city that not only was still reeling from the effects of the rather sudden event of reunification of East and West Germany but which also, at least in its western half, in the course of two or three decades, had turned into a major center of Turkish and Muslim immigration and permanent presence. However, after two-and-a-half years, in 2001, I left Berlin to become once more part of an academic setting, the Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy and Theology of Sankt Georgen, in Frankfurt. There I started a certificate course called Introduction to Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations for students and professionals and found the time and space to enable me to accompany Christian-Muslim developments in critical study and debate.

So after encountering Muslims and studying Islam in many settings and facets for more or less four decades, I find myself back in my home country. However, Germany's society- its social, political, and ideological preoccupations and debates - when compared with the mid-sixties, have changed beyond recognition. I feel privileged now to have the opportunity to try to understand my country and continent anew. I notice that the massive immigration into Germany not only poses problems but also, and above all, has brought about a vitality and plurality that turns out to be enriching as well as stimulating. Having lived over the past decades in countries with various majority-minority constellations, I look at the present-day German and Euro-

pean discussions about identity, integration, and assimilation with a sense of calm and confidence.

The electronic media, especially the Internet, enables me to answer questions about Christian faith and practice put to me regularly from Muslims and Christians from around the world in various languages (to date: English, German, French, Indonesian, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Turkish).² Also, now, finally, I hope to find the time for undertaking an extended study into aspects of a core area of Muslim faith and piety: How do Muslims in their great variety today portray Muhammad, whom most Muslims revere deeply as the person who was asked to convey to all humankind, past and present, the Qur'an and who is believed to be for all times the first and the authoritative interpreter of its divine message.

To conclude let me state succinctly three elements that above all else have inspired and sustained me as a student of Islam in my lifelong engagement:

The daily celebration of the Eucharist;

The daily contact with Muslims, in immediate, personal encounter as well as through study of texts and other media;

The awareness that grows daily of global interdependence and of the responsibility this puts on Muslim and Christian believers everywhere.

² See <http://www.answers-to-muslims.com>