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Reconsidering the concept of mission in the light of comparative theology

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Chapter 13: Reconsidering the Concept of Mission in the Light of Comparative Theology

Klaus von Stosch

Abstract

The concept of mission has a bad reputation in the Western world today. Many Christians in mainline churches regard mission as offensive to non-Christians, and think that it precludes any possibility of appreciating the otherness of other religions. Drawing on insights from my work in comparative theology, this chapter aims to address this issue and reconcile a universalistic and classical understanding of missionary work with a positive attitude towards other religions. On the one hand, I argue that Christianity without a commitment to missionary work is not possible. On the other hand, I try to show how mission can be understood so as to permit an appreciation of religious diversity. Focusing on the relationship between the three Abrahamic religions in particular, the main question that arises is whether Christians are committed to hoping that, at the end of history, everybody accepts Christ and, if so, how such a claim can be reconciled with the permanent acceptance of Judaism and Islam.

The Concept of Mission: Contested but Necessary

The concept of mission is very much disputed in the Western world today.¹ In public opinion – inside and outside the churches – the idea of mission is so much under fire that the vast majority of Christians in the mainline churches at least no longer want to do missionary work. What are the reasons for this scepticism towards the idea of mission? It is certainly connected with the conquest and colonization of Latin America.² In light of this negative example, mission is suspected of not taking seriously the fact that other cultures and religions also have something to offer to Christianity. Non-Christians appear like savages who are objects of mission and who, if necessary, have to be forced to their fortune. “‘Missionary work’ became the epitome of intolerance and a religious-political attitude branded as a colonial mentality”.³

Moreover, in Europe, scepticism towards missionary work has become stronger because of the memories of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. People in Europe have experienced too often and too lastingly how destructive the missionary conduct of a movement with claims to absoluteness and salvation can be. Hence, they are not willing to grant much credit to the churches at this point. Whereas interreligious dialogue is highly valued, the idea of mission has been greatly criticized and is embarrassing to many Christians themselves.

There is an even deeper crisis hidden behind this denial of the concept of mission. Many Christians have forgotten how to talk about their faith. Some are not even sure whether their faith is worth communicating. Others simply do not know how to communicate their faith because it has become more and more unusual to talk about questions of faith openly. For these Christians, mission with the goal of converting non-Christians or winning over disciples of Jesus according to the formula of Mt 28:18-20 does not function as a model of faith anymore.

This is a big problem for the future of Christianity because this religion is not possible without missionary work – at least in a wide sense. Let me briefly explain why I think that

missionary work is so essential for Christianity.⁴ I will first try to show the structure of my argument:

- (1) The basic desire of most people is to love and to be loved.
- (2) According to Christian faith, God loves everybody unconditionally (in Christ) and enables everybody to respond to this love (in the Holy Spirit).
- (3) Christian Faith offers the fulfilment of the basic desire of most people (conclusion from 1 and 2).
- (4) If someone desires a higher good (as in 1) and is in need of this good and you know that this desire has already been fulfilled or can be fulfilled (as in 2), you have the ethical duty to bear witness to the fulfilment of the desire.
- (5) The truth of (2) can only be testified to through both concrete love and the articulation of this love.
- (6) The church (as the community of those who believe in 2) has the ethical duty to proclaim God's love for everybody and to make this love concrete (conclusion from 4 and 5).
- (7) Missionary work can be defined by two elements: a) spreading God's love to the world in the sense of spreading the kingdom of God, i.e., making God's love concrete; b) proclaiming God's love to everybody, i.e., inviting people to witness to the love of God to everybody.
- (8) Missionary work is an ethical duty of the church defined as those who believe in (2) (conclusion from 6 and 7).

Premise (1) is meant as an empirical observation. As a theologian, I am even convinced that every human longs for love, but I do not want to make this stronger claim here because the weaker premise is sufficient for my argument. I personally have never met anybody who was not longing for love and I have never met anybody who contradicted this premise. Hence, it seems reasonable to me to assume at least that many people long for love.

Premise (2) is the basic truth claim of Christianity as reconstructed by modern theologians such as Thomas Pröpper.⁵ This claim says that Christian faith consists in confessing that Jesus Christ showed God's unconditional love for God's creatures and that God enables us through the Spirit to welcome this love and to bear witness to it through our deeds and words. As this kind of witness is exactly what people are waiting for, then if premise 1 is true, it has been demonstrated that one of the basic needs of humanity, or at least of most humans, is or can be fulfilled through Christianity.

Premise (4) again has no direct connection to particular Christian truth claims but tries to make a normative statement that should be accepted by everyone. Maybe the truth of this premise is easier to accept if we emphasize how much the premise is dedicated to the dignity of human desires of a higher good. Hence, the premise does not say that the fulfilment of any desire has to be proclaimed. For example, it is not necessary to tell somebody who is longing for chocolate that there is already chocolate for her available in the kitchen. Everybody knows that chocolate can have bad consequences for health. Hence, the necessity of talking about the accessibility of the fulfilment of this desire is not always helpful. But Christianity claims that the highest conceivable good is given as fulfilment of the most basic need of humanity. Again, I choose a weaker version of this premise to make it less questionable. I am not talking about something than which nothing greater be conceived, but only of a higher good. If it is good and urgent to fulfil a certain desire, it is always good and even necessary to make its fulfilment available if I am able to do this.

Premise 5 states that showing somebody that she is loved by God unconditionally needs more than the proclamation of the abstract idea of love. Christians believe that God's love wants to be testified to performatively. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ shows and performs God's unconditional love to all creatures – independently of their achievements and abilities. The church has the task to bear witness to this love through its own performance. That is why the church as the concrete everlasting body of Christ is necessary for salvation from a Catholic point of view. Salvation, which is the loving community of God and humans, is not possible abstractly but only through human love, which is inspired by the humanity of the Divine love in Jesus Christ. As the Second Vatican Council pointed out, this belief does not imply that non-Christians cannot participate in salvation. It simply wants to make clear that salvation has to be concrete and understandable and, in a Catholic perspective, this is only possible through Christ and his everlasting body, the church.

Let me try to explain this point a bit. Parents can try to show to their children that their love is not dependent on certain conditions. They can show to their children that they will love them even when the children do not fulfil their wishes. However, even the greatest love of parents to their children only symbolizes the unconditional nature of God's love. The parents' love will still be conditional, i.e., dependent on contingent conditions, such as the mere existence of the parents.⁶ When the parents want to offer unconditional love to their children, they will need to refer to this love itself. In a similar way, the church's ministry can and should try to offer charity without preconditions. That is why it is good that the church engages in so many social areas without paying attention to the question of whether its ministry reaches the baptized or the unbaptized. But if the church wants to make clear that the witness of love and charity is grounded in unconditional love for each person, the church has to speak of God's self-communication in Christ. This love is unconditional because it is already realized within the life of the Holy Trinity. Humans are created within the love of the first person of the Trinity to the son and become part of the unconditional nature of this love through Christ. Thus, on the one hand, the church has to relate to the message of God's love in Jesus Christ to make clear that love is really given to everybody and that it will succeed against death. On the other hand, the love of Jesus Christ today can only be concrete and understandable through the love of Christians who bear witness to this love. Time and again the Gospel insists that it is not enough just to talk of God's love, but that it must be performed in favour of those who are in need of it.

Human love finds its limit at death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands for the hope of escape even from death. The incarnation of God in Christ testifies to the lasting, unbreakable devotion of God precisely in the form of the weakness of a human being. By interpreting the testimony of one's own gift of life in the light of God's self-surrender in Jesus Christ, it thus becomes a testimony of a love stronger than death and capable of redeeming even the worst suffering. This does not mean that love becomes stronger through the explicit reference to Christ, but only that it becomes explicitly understandable as such, i.e., as the unconditional love of God which is stronger than death. Hence, it is the Christian message of God's self-communication as love in Jesus Christ that is needed to respond to the fundamental concern of so many people that love might be absurd. The fundamental longing of humans to love and to be loved is filled with it. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can surrender ourselves to love in ultimate trust and we can follow the movement of the unconditional love of God.

It remains the task and the fulfilment of the church's essence to make God's love tangible to every human being – especially to the weak. In our present situation, this means, for example, that God's love can also be testified to the many refugees who have come to us in recent years – among them also many Muslims. The church has to help them concretely to integrate into

our society and to build up their existence. It is also important to show them that they are loved unconditionally and that they can trust in the mercy of God when human power can no longer do anything. It seems to be the task of the church to work for justice and, at the same time, to bear witness that the greater justice of God can fulfil our desires much more deeply than we suspect and understand. Muslims, too, are to be told of God's mercy and justice; they also have to be confronted with the message of hope of a God of love who promises the Word in Jesus Christ to every human being and wants to change their situation. They, too, are invited to help to build up the kingdom of God, which began in Jesus Christ. Does this mean that the church should also explicitly ask them to be baptized in order to become members of the Catholic Church?

There are two lines of thinking which make it difficult for me to say "Yes" here. The first line of thinking has to do with the concept of mission for today in general (section 2). This part will be my justification of premise (7). The second line of thinking is founded in the peculiarity of the relationship of Christianity towards Judaism (section 3) and Islam (section 4).

Approaches to Recover the Concept of Mission for Today

If mission aims at convincing other people to become members of the church, it is in tension with the basic attitude of many people in the church today, as we pointed out above. It also contradicts the basic idea to bear witness to the unconditionality of God's love to the world, because unconditionality goes beyond all mission strategies. However, the situation is different when one conceives of mission not as the spreading of the church, but as the spreading of the love and the kingdom of God. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, for example, pleads for such an understanding of mission when he writes: "*The source of any mission of the church consists in the proclamation of the kingdom of God*".⁷ As the central characteristic of this kingdom he mentions the liberation of humans.⁸ In this approach, the liberation and humanization turn out to be the decisive goals of missionary work. With such an understanding, mission ultimately aims at bearing witness to God's incarnation by creating space for more humanity in the world. In this understanding, missionaries have the task of working in every corner of the world to ensure that the marginalized receive more attention and that the oppressed can assert their rights.

In this understanding – which is widespread among the mainline churches today – missionary work is a service to all people, and it is understood as a mission of solidarity to support those people who need help. In the end, mission in this perspective is understood as the common journey in the *Missio Dei*. Based on texts like Lk 4:18f., mission deals with the unselfish commitment in favour of the people⁹ and with the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed. Particularly since the 1990s, special emphasis has been placed on "*mission as a ministry of reconciliation*".¹⁰ Missionary work can help to cross borders and create an atmosphere that attracts people.¹¹ It can be understood as "the art of keeping together a wide horizon open for the greater life and hope which the church also needs".¹² What is important in this understanding is how the relation between the church and the world is conceived. The church no longer faces the world as the only authority of salvation and no longer tries to save as many people as possible from the world into the church. Rather, the church tries to cooperate with the world in working for the kingdom of God. Moreover, the church tries to create a "coalition of the willing" to make the human kindness of God (which can be experienced in Jesus of Nazareth) tangible in the world.

Thus, people can work for the kingdom of God also outside the church by following the traces of the *Logos* in humankind. In its service to people, the church can try to keep them open to the greater longing for ultimate fulfilment for their respective lives – without pretending always to already know how the fulfilment of this longing will be. Ultimately, the kingdom of God remains something which cannot be exhausted on earth. Hence, missionary work always remains in a tension between the already achieved presence of the liberating Spirit of God in the concrete church and the still unrealized fullness of this presence. Here, missionary work, on the one hand, can work to make the church more the place of the presence of the kingdom of God. On the other hand, the church has to encourage all people outside the church that open themselves to the Spirit of God, i.e., the church cooperates with everybody who stands up for the good of all people.

From a Christian point of view, it is precisely the imitation of the practice of Jesus and the narration of the biblical stories that can lead into the greater freedom of the kingdom of God. At the same time, however, the kingdom of God will not be identified with the church and will always be kept open to the greater truth and presence of God. Even if we believe that God is revealed in our tradition, we will carry this treasure of Divine presence in “jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7). Humans will never succeed in grasping the unconditional as the absolute in all its dimensions; thus, humans will always remain learning throughout their lives –in interreligious dialogue and also in missionary commitment. In epistemic terms, every human being is so strongly influenced by his or her cultural and life-world background that encounters with other cultures and forms of life can always help to understand one's own truth in a new and deeper way. God is always greater than our understanding and human cognitive capacities are always limited and fallible.¹³ The epistemic humility¹⁴ that follows from this insight should shape people of all religious traditions in their mutual relations. Humans have to testify together that they can only express and bear witness to the gift of the unconditional in a conditional, symbolic and thus, possibly, misleading way. The missionary, too, can therefore never appear only in the attitude of giving and proclaiming, but also needs to listen carefully to others.

Thus, on the one hand, missionaries will be humble and ready to learn from their interlocutors – even in their understanding of Christ. On the other hand, interreligious dialogue needs loyalty to one's own tradition, and missionary work has to bear witness to Christ explicitly. If we are not prepared to introduce a certain, denominational conviction into the dialogue, then “a decisive element of the dialogue is missing”.¹⁵ And if we do not refer explicitly to Christ, the claim to the unconditionality of love cannot be founded. Hence, every authentic dialogue necessarily contains a missionary dimension. Dialogue and mission are difficult to separate¹⁶ and they should not be separated. Nonetheless, missionary work and dialogue have to be distinguished.¹⁷ They are not merely identical; rather, every form of authentic testimony of one's own faith and every form of dialogue also imply a missionary dimension.¹⁸

As we explained above, missionary work implies, on the one hand, bearing witness to God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it wants to build the kingdom of God – without knowing beforehand how people of other religions and worldviews relate to this kingdom. Therefore, being a witness and being humble belong together inseparably, both in mission and in dialogue. It is precisely the concept of testimony, despite all the emphasis on existential commitment, that draws attention to the limitations of one's own point of view: “But the emphasis on giving testimony also brings an element of humility into the dialogue between religions, because it refers to the fact that one can always only bear witness to one's own experience and insight. This creates an openness for the other and thus a space in which the other can in turn bear witness to the truth of *his* tradition”.¹⁹

The Special Relationship between Christianity and Judaism

We have seen so far how important it is that we link the necessity of missionary work with the task of spreading the kingdom of God. Missionary work primarily wants to make God's love concrete with the means of love. Such an understanding might help people today overcome their worries with the concept of mission because it makes clear how much the church can learn from people and ideas outside the church and how important epistemic humility is. It can encourage the church to bear witness to the presence of Christ everywhere and to bear witness to every form of humanity, which actually helps humans become more human.

It has also become clear that we should not restrict missionary work to engagement for love and humanism. The unconditionality of love requires the reference to Christ to be able to convince people that love is stronger than death and that it makes sense to have ultimate trust in it. From a Christian perspective, humanism is not merely a challenge that has to be met. Incarnating humanistic values and seeking for unconditional love are more than pure ideas; the ideal of humanistic values and unconditional love can become reality with the help of God. This help of God has already become reality in Christ. Therefore, this help has to be proclaimed to understand why we are allowed to have hope.

The proclamation of the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ always has to be linked to a practice that wants to put people in service to realize this love – especially for those who are oppressed. God appreciates all human beings; God's love of all creatures wants to become reality. The basic idea of Christianity consists in the hope that this unconditional love has already been realized in Christ and that it therefore can be proclaimed by the church. That is why we need this explicit proclamation to give a ground to the human trust in love. It remains a Christian idea that God also wants to call people through the church – especially through the ministry in it. It also remains a Christian requirement to invite people to the service of the kingdom of God. This can mean that these people are baptized and become members of the church. As members of the church they will be able to help to establish and to bear witness to the kingdom of God and to the unconditional philanthropy of God that applies to all human beings.

I have tried to explain how important it is to bear witness to God's self-communication in Jesus Christ if we want to stick to the universality and concreteness of Christian hope. But the election of Israel seems to be a counter argument against this insistence on explicit missionary work. The permanent and irrevocable election of Israel seems to make it clear that the philanthropy, justice and mercy of God can also be testified to without explicit reference to Jesus of Nazareth. Israel obviously proclaims the God of Jesus Christ without accepting Christ. The Old or First Testament speaks of the unconditional faithfulness and love of God without explicitly mentioning Jesus Christ. This fact leads Paul to the insight that the permanent election of Israel has to be respected (Rom 9-11), and the Catholic Church has also recognized this election as permanent. Israel, too, is involved in the ministry of testifying to the love of God that takes shape in Jesus Christ. Thus Israel – from a Catholic perspective – remains oriented towards God's self-communication, which is embodied in Christ. However, Paul is sensible enough to articulate Christian hope in this context in Old Testament images of hope (Rom 11:26). Hence, Paul's intervention can be understood in a twofold way: On the one hand, it is Jesus Christ who all people (including Jews) will eschatologically recognize as their Saviour. This is the reason why Paul continues to bring his understanding of Christ to his people and convince them that he was the Messiah. On the other hand, Israel's unfulfilled

hopes remain valid – even after Christ’s coming. That is why Paul articulates them in their original form. Many of these hopes – such as those for a concrete social visibility of salvation – are permanently virulent and challenge the testimony of the church permanently. I understand this to mean that the encounter with Jesus Christ at the end of times will not happen in a way that Christians are triumphantly confirmed in their faith. Rather, it has to be conceived in a way that Jews and Christians alike will be surprised by the reality of Jesus Christ. Both will equally recognize in him aspects that correspond to their own shape of hope (and thus prove them right), and other ones that surpass their own shape of hope in unexpected ways (and thus show the lasting right of testimony to each other’s religion).²⁰

Paul’s concept allows us to approach the issue of the mission of Jews with extreme caution. From this point of view, Israel has a lasting role in the history of salvation which has not been made obsolete by the church. Israel has to remind Christians of many things that they might forget in their enthusiasm for Jesus Christ. Even if Jesus Christ himself is “God’s body language”¹ and the fully valid incarnation of God’s self-surrender, which implies the necessity of all people to bear witness, the testimony of the church is provisional and, in many places, deficient. Israel has obviously been chosen to bear witness, even after Jesus Christ, to the faithfulness of God and the covenant with Israel and all people. Although the church has lasting questions for Israel, it must also learn from Israel permanently. The true Messiah is just as different from their own Messianic hopes as the figure of Jesus Christ is – at least if we look at Christ as he is proclaimed by the church. Thus, although the church as the body of Christ is in a clear ontological and historical connection with him and will recognize him in the end of times, it is true at the same time that the church has to learn decisive things from Jewish hopes of the Messiah. Many other aspects of Jewish life also pose a permanent challenge to the church, from which more can be learned. Therefore, there are good theological reasons for being reticent with the mission of Jews. It must be in the church’s interest that the Jews, in their faithfulness to the covenant of God, bear lasting witness to the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ, who also broadens and challenges their own understanding of Christ.²¹

Probably up until this point, most Catholic theologians will agree – at least in Germany. The special appreciation of Judaism by the church has a solid fundament in the common Bible of both religions and in the Jewishness of Jesus, which has been discovered again especially after the Shoah. The teaching of the church towards Judaism has obviously changed and makes it clear that institutional missionary work has to be avoided here because of the everlasting mission of Israel also for the church.²² Even Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in his last controversial article makes clear that he is against the idea of missionary activities towards Judaism.²³

Explicit Missionary Work among Muslims – An Implication of Christian faith?

Can this special relationship between Christianity and Judaism be applied in some sense to Islam? Are some features of the special relationship between Judaism and Christianity transferable to Islam? On the one hand, the Qur’an quite obviously places itself in the Biblical tradition and offers a surprisingly clear respect for Jesus Christ that goes far beyond appreciations found in any other religion. Thus, the Qur’an recognizes Jesus not only as a prophet and messenger, but also as the Word and Spirit of God, and repeatedly calls him the

¹ I borrow this expression from Daniel Madigan.

Messiah.²⁴ The Qur'an also speaks of Christians time and again with great respect and takes up a great abundance of biblical motifs.

On the other hand, there are also clear movements of the Qur'an away from Judaism and Christianity. Biblical traditions are creatively reinterpreted and the biblically testified history of salvation is further developed. Jesus Christ is not recognized as the Son of God, and – despite all the appreciation of his uniqueness – he tends to be integrated in the Qur'anic prophetology.²⁵ The death of Jesus on the cross plays no role for the Qur'an and is even rejected according to traditional interpretations.²⁶ Other characteristics of the ecclesiastical testimony of Christ are also not appreciated in the Qur'an and the tradition that follows it.

It is unclear how this ambivalent picture has to be assessed. Are there contradictions between Islam and Christianity that make it impossible for Christians to see any permanent value in Islam? Or is it possible to give a lasting significance to Islam from a Christian point of view? I have tried to argue for this positive significance at length in my recent publications.²⁷ In these publications I try to show how the Qur'an inscribes itself in the Biblical history – without any direct contradiction to the current teaching of the church.²⁸ In particular, I argue that the Qur'an offers a foreign prophecy for Jesus Christ, which has something to say to Christians permanently. Therefore, I try to explore the possibility that Islam might represent a lasting enrichment for the church – in a similar sense as explained for Judaism in the last section.

Nonetheless, it is not part of the church's teaching that there will be such a lasting positive interaction between Islam and Christianity. Whereas the permanent esteem of Israel has become part of the teaching of the magisterium, the relationship to Islam is open to different interpretations and can always be determined anew. As Islam is the younger religion, the relationship is also very much dependent on how Muslims relate to Christianity. In this respect, things are about to change. Especially in Europe, there is an increasing number of Muslim scholars who are reevaluating the intertextual references between the Qur'an and the Bible and are calling for a greater appreciation of the monotheistic sister religions. At this very moment it is important to be open for a positive development of Muslim-Christian relations and to react constructively to the new readiness for dialogue.

Muslim theologians today are seriously discussing the question of whether they can abandon the classical hierarchical definition of their relationship to Judaism and Christianity.²⁹ They are asking whether they can acknowledge a lasting value of the Bible. The current debates of Muslims in Germany remind me of the new awakening that the Catholic Church achieved in its relationship with Israel after the Shoah. Many Muslims explore today whether they can reinterpret the Qur'an in such a way that it overcomes their traditional supersessionism towards Christians and Jews.

If Muslims succeed in reading the Qur'an in a non-supersessionist way and if they discover how deeply Christ is appreciated in the Qur'an, this might lead to a deep love of Christ and of Christians. If the Qur'an does not explicitly contradict the current teaching of the church, it might even be possible for a Muslim to become a member of the church without leaving Islam. The history of Christianity shows us that Jews could remain Jews and follow the Torah after becoming Christians. Gavin D'Costa in one of his recent articles³⁰ reminds us of the fact that it can be enriching for the church to welcome Jews as Jews within the church and he argues for a special catechumenate for Jews in the church. He wants to make clear how enriching the peculiarity of Judaism can be for the church.

Along these lines of thinking, Muslims might be welcomed as Muslims in the church. Perhaps they could be encouraged to bring some of their Muslim identity into the church and thus strengthen the catholicity of the church.³¹ However, I would add that this enriching nature of Judaism and Islam is not only true for those parts of our sister religions that can be integrated into the church. The Jewish rejection of Christ is also something that can be important for the church because it reminds Christians of the fact that many messianic hopes have not been fulfilled yet. Hence, it makes Christians more sensible of the fact that the reality of Christ is much more than the church's teaching of him. In a similar respect, the critique of Muslims today and the critique of the Qur'an can encourage Christians to see the weakness of their own witness and to work more intensely to cultivate Christ's body through their witness. It can be shown that the Qur'an has intelligible and good arguments against the shape of Christianity of Christ's time. It is obvious that there are multiple arguments against Christianity today. Criticizing the church is not a sign of being either irrational or a sinner. Sometimes this critique is even necessary for somebody who wants to stay rational and a person of integrity.³² Thus, the solidarity of critique by those who believe in the one God, and even in some sense in the particularity of Christ, will be very helpful for the church and for its work.

In some way it might be possible for Muslims to cultivate their relationship with Christ without leaving their faith. Maybe they will even be able to recognize the church as the body of Christ and they will find respect and appreciation for it. In such a situation it might not be helpful to invite Muslims to convert, and it might be better to invite them to work for the kingdom of God. Muslims who are reconciled with themselves and with the church can take sides for the God of Jesus Christ in a much more effective way than new converts who have not yet completely grasped their new faith and who have negativity towards their own past.

It would be sad if the church took advantage of the weakness of Muslim refugees in the West by trying to persuade as many as possible to join the church. The treatment of refugees in the West can serve as a good case study of how the church understands its own task in relation to Islam. If it is true that Muslims can be enriching for the church and that some Muslims might even become part of the church's mission as Muslims, it is questionable whether it should be the general aim of the church to convince every Muslim to give up Islam. Hence, without giving up missionary visions, the church should seek to build bridges to a new appreciation of Islam that would allow Muslim refugees to look positively at their own heritage as part of their biography. Even if Muslims want to convert to Christianity, it is important to seriously examine together with them whether their newly found love for Jesus Christ and the church really contradicts Islam. Through such an attitude of estimation the church can help those Muslims who convert to Christianity to become bridges between both religions. The church can also help those many Muslims who do not convert have positive experiences with the church so they will be encouraged to change the shape of Islam in a productive and positive way – especially as regards the relationship of Islam towards non-Muslims and as regards the relationship of Muslims towards Christ.

The fact that so many refugees from Muslim countries have been welcomed with solidarity and hospitality in some Western countries can still help to create a new coexistence of the monotheistic religions. Instead of consuming ourselves in the agonal logic of the market, we should see the historical chance of a common building of the kingdom of God through a common endeavour of the largest religions of humankind. Especially in a time when more and more people try to argue against Islam in Europe and try to destroy trust in foreigners, it is the task of the church to create an atmosphere of love for strangers and refugees. This atmosphere will be the best testimony to the spirit of Christ in our world of conflict, mistrust and fear.

Let me conclude with a pragmatic argument which does not want to argue against any missionary work towards Muslims but, rather, against too much emphasis on it. Although some Evangelicals continue to dream of world mission, every somewhat sober observer of world history should realize that Christianity will not replace Islam, nor will Islam replace Christianity as a religion. If one considers the situation in Europe, it also becomes clear that the real challenge of the church is not Islam, but the increasing number of people who have left and are leaving the church because they have lost all hope in God. More and more people no longer trust in a historically powerful God who transforms the world into greater righteousness. They no longer believe in the justice and mercy of something higher than themselves. They have become more and more sceptical towards the promises of unconditional love.

At this point, Christians should discover Muslims as allies in their testimony to the justice and mercy of God. Christians and Muslims can mutually see each other as exemplifying a path of selfless piety and active charity that can enrich themselves and our time. We simply have to keep in mind how much the agonal and often violent competition between religions contributes to people losing confidence in them altogether. Then we will see how much Muslims and Christians in the West, at least, are in a community of destiny. Only if Muslims and Christians together with Jews succeed in developing a new culture of mutual respect and estimation can the situation of religions in European societies change.

Conclusions

If we look back at the two ways to understand missionary work, which I have tried to explain in this chapter, my conclusion is the following. The church will always be obliged to bear witness at all times and to all people to the God who is revealed as love in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church will always carry out missionary work in an implicit sense. This sense does not only imply establishing the kingdom of God with all people who are willing to help. Moreover, the church will also bear witness to how much all this commitment is founded in God's grace which has been incarnated in Jesus Christ. Hence, it is not enough for the church to do social work, but the church will always have to proclaim explicitly God's love in Jesus Christ.

At the same time, the church should be extremely reluctant to invite Muslims or even Jews to conversion. The above-mentioned decision of the Catholic Church not to support any institutional missionary work among Jews might be helpful also as regards Muslims. This does not mean that it is not possible in individual cases for Jews or Muslims to become part of the church by God's will – just as it might also be possible for Christians to be invited by God to Islam or Judaism. I was very much impressed by a good friend of mine who converted from the Catholic faith to Islam as a young man. Today, he is an important Muslim theologian and he says that he has never loved the church as much as he does now. For me, he is an example of a redeemed convert who did not get his new home at the expense of his old one, but who succeeded in establishing a reconciled integration of both sides. His love for Jesus Christ and the church will be shown today in the way he builds bridges between both religions through his theology and his personal witness. He does not have multiple religious identities, but in the Muslim country in which he lives and teaches, he does much more for the recognition of Christianity and the church than many missionaries. Hence, the primary goal of mission with regard to Islam can sometimes be not to persuade Muslims to get baptized, but to encourage them to change the relationship of Islam to the world and to Christianity.

Eschatologically speaking, there is not only the possibility that one faith proves to be true and the others misleading. Rather, it is also possible that different forms of faith can be connected in a complementary way and are permanently referring to each other. Therefore, the eschatological encounter with Jesus Christ could also be an encounter with the Jewish Messiah, so that it has a stronger political dimension than Christians usually expect. Once one has considered this possibility, it also seems possible to conceive the Second Coming of Jesus Christ not in contradiction to the coming of the Mahdi. Maybe here we can also see unrealized hopes of fulfilment from Muslim tradition, which can be inspiring for Christian hopes. Some of my Iranian colleagues have told me about a very nice quote by Alvin Plantinga in this context. He is supposed to have said in Iran: “If Jesus Christ comes again and then the Mahdi comes along and wants to join him in his work for comprehensive justice, I would know no reason why Jesus should refuse that”.

Despite all sympathy for the openness that is emerging here, I want to conclude with a reminder that there are still many unresolved problems for Muslim-Christian encounters. Therefore, it continues to be important to look for possibilities of appreciating differences even where it initially hurts and cannot yet be translated into a reconciled difference. The vision of a mutual recognition of both religions that has been outlined here is not more than a possibility of thinking. This possibility has to be turned into concrete hope through dialogical work. In some sense, this kind of dialogical work is not so far away from the understanding of missionary work which I tried to defend here. If we follow this line of thinking in relation to the main topic of this book, it might become clear that a religious identity which is characterized through missionary work and universal truth claims can be coherent with the appreciation of some religious diversity.

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- ¹ In the first two sections of this chapter, I wanted to repeat some insights which I developed already in: Klaus von Stosch, "Missionarisch Kirche sein? Eine Verhältnisbestimmung im Blick auf den Islam," *Lebendiges Zeugnis* 67 (2012): 45-53. But during the fascinating process of discussing this paper my thought changed a lot.
- ² See *ibid.*, 247; Arnd Bünker, "Welche Mission(en)? Welche Missionswissenschaft(en)?" in *Mission im Kontext Europas. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zu einem zeitgemäßen Missionsverständnis*, ed. Martin Stowasser and Franz Helm (Wien: V&R unipress, 2011), 35, 33-55.
- ³ Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, "Das Reich Gottes und seine Gerechtigkeit als zentrale Dimension der Mission. Eine responsiv-theologische Perspektive," in *Mission im Kontext Europas. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zu einem zeitgemäßen Missionsverständnis*, ed. Martin Stowasser and Franz Helm (Wien: V&R unipress, 2011), 115f, 115-130.
- ⁴ Some of my thoughts here at the end of this section and then also in sections 3 and 4 can already be found in: Klaus von Stosch, "Mission unter Muslimen? Eine Positionsbestimmung aus katholischer Sicht," in *Verlorene Strahlkraft. Welches Glaubenszeugnis heute gefragt ist*, ed. Thomas Marschler and Klaus von Stosch (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2018), 69-83.
- ⁵ Cf. Thomas Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte. Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie*, 2nd ed. (München: Kösel, 1988), 194-198.
- ⁶ It is true that love of a necessary being to a contingent being is also contingent in the respect that it is dependent on the existence of the contingent being. But it cannot fail and it is not dependent on any other condition than the mere existence of the contingent being. That is why I think that it makes sense to call it unconditional. My point is that God will always love creation because God's nature is pure love and is determined to love humans for all times. Such an unconditional love is not possible for mere humans. Human love can only symbolize or represent unconditional love. Humans can only start to perform it, but will still need eschatological fulfillment and reference to God's unconditional love to be understandable.
- ⁷ Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, "Das Reich Gottes und seine Gerechtigkeit," 117.
- ⁸ See *ibid.*, 121-125.
- ⁹ See Henning Wrogemann, "Was ist Mission? Einige Beobachtungen zu globalen Trends und lokalen Herausforderungen," *Praxis Gemeindepädagogik* 64 (2011): 40, 38-42.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 41f. See also Henning Wrogemann, *Den Glanz widerspiegeln. Vom Sinn der christlichen Mission, ihren Kraftquellen und Ausdrucksgestalten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 2009).
- ¹² Hermann Schalück, "Verstehen und verstanden werden. Mission im Zeichen von Interkulturalität, Pluralismus und Dialog," *HerKorr Spezial* 2 (2010): 12, 9-13.
- ¹³ Cf. John Cottingham, "The Epistemic Implications of Religious Diversity," in this volume.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Peter Jonkers, "How to Break the Ill-fated Bond Between Religious Truth and Violence?" in this volume, who is right in arguing that "the attitude of epistemic humility is a very effective means to break the ill-fated bond between religious truth and violence".
- ¹⁵ Christiane Tietz, "Dialogkonzepte in der Komparativen Theologie," in *Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, ed. Reinhold Bernhardt and Klaus von Stosch (Zürich: TVZ, 2009), 326, 315-338.
- ¹⁶ See Hans Waldenfels, "Dialog und Mission – ein Widerspruch?" *ZMR* 94 (2010): 65-73.
- ¹⁷ See Catherine Cornille, *The im-possibility of interreligious dialogue*. New York: Crossroad Publ., 2008, 71f.
- ¹⁸ See Paul Tillich, "Theologische Grundlagen der Mission," in *Offenbarung und Glaube. Schriften zur Theologie II = Gesammelte Werke VIII*, ed. Paul Tillich, (Stuttgart: de Gruyter, 1970), 280, 276-284.
- ¹⁹ Catherine Cornille, "Das Zeugnis und seine Bedeutung im interreligiösen Dialog," *Concilium* (D) 47 (2011): 56f, 49-58.
- ²⁰ It is true that Christians know already that the Messiah is Jesus, which is something that Jews still have to learn. But, on the other hand, there are so many aspects of Christ that are neglected in Christianity that I do not see any reason for the claim of an epistemic superiority here. For example, Christians will have to understand the political dimensions of their hopes and how they are connected with Israel and how ambiguity can be part of revelation and many other things. Cf. for some reflections on the question what Christians can learn from Jews Klaus von Stosch, *Offenbarung* (Paderborn: UTB, 2010), 120-122.
- ²¹ This is something which can also be done by Jews within the church, i.e., by people who were called Jewish Christians in ancient times. That is why it makes sense to invite Jews who want to convert to Christianity to stay in some connection to their Jewish roots or even to stay observant to the Torah. I will develop this point a bit more in conversation with Gavin D'Costa in the next section.
- ²² I fully agree here with the Vatican reflections on the Catholic-Jewish relations from 2015: "In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's Word, and particularly in view of

the great tragedy of the Shoah". (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html; (12-18-18))

²³ See Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI., "Gnade und Berufung ohne Reue," *IkaZ* 47 (2018): 387-406. In this article the Pope Emeritus makes clear that – according to Paul's teaching in Rom 11:26 – all Israel will be saved, not only those Jews who converted to Christianity. Hence, he opens a door for salvation without explicit acknowledgement of Christ in this life. In his last article, he emphasizes now that missionary work towards Judaism has to be stopped. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI., "Nicht Mission, sondern Dialog," in *HerKorr* 72 (2018): 14: "Deswegen ist der Missionsauftrag universal – mit einer Ausnahme: Eine Mission der Juden war einfach deshalb nicht vorgesehen und nicht nötig, weil sie allein unter allen Völkern den ‚unbekannten Gott‘ kannten. Für Israel galt und gilt daher nicht Mission, sondern der Dialog".

²⁴ See Mouhanad Khorchide/Klaus von Stosch, *Der andere Prophet. Jesus im Koran* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 136-141.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 176-226.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 147-156.

²⁷ See *ibid.* and Klaus von Stosch, *Herausforderung Islam. Christliche Annäherungen*, 3rd ed. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2019); all arguments of my chapter here are based on the insights of these two books.

²⁸ It is clear that many verses of the Qur'an seem to imply something else. But I think that it can be shown that the Qur'anic interventions are always directed against an understanding of Christianity which has to be challenged not only from a Muslim point of view, but also from the perspective of the magisterium today. However, I cannot prove this point in this short chapter and I have to point to my above-mentioned books again.

²⁹ This is not only obvious in Germany and some other Western countries. I also encounter these new tendencies at universities in Iran, Tunisia and other Muslim countries. Cf. as a recent example the forthcoming article of Vahid Mahdavi Mehr, "Can there be an Islamic comparative theology?" in *Handbook of Comparative Theology*, ed. Pim Valkenberg, which will appear in 2019 with Brill.

³⁰ See Gavin D'Costa, "God's irrevocable covenant to his people. Towards a tentative minimalist Catholic Zionism," in *Theology of Religions – Roman-Catholic perspectives*, ed. The Newman Institute Uppsala (2019), forthcoming.

³¹ Please note that I only argue for a *possibility* concerning Islam ("perhaps"!), whereas there is strong evidence for this concerning Judaism because the Jewish heritage is part of Christian identity. Hence, I do not want to neglect the difference regarding the relation of Christianity towards Judaism and towards Islam. I just suggest leaving the possibility open that Islam might have a similar function for the church as Judaism.

³² Just to be clear: As a Catholic I believe that all normative teachings of the church are rational and have to be respected, and that the Catholic Church actually is the body of Christ. But if you consider the reaction of some bishops to child abuse, for example, it becomes clear that the loyalty to Christ and to the Catholic Church sometimes makes it necessary to criticize the Church. Moreover, there are situations in the history of the Church where the teaching of the Church is not helpful for understanding Christ. For example, the Qur'anic critique of the Christological theory that Jesus had no need to eat something (Q 5:75) is a sound critique of a kind of Christology which was mainstream in the time of the early Church (cf. Khorchide/von Stosch, *Der andere Prophet*, 168f.). Hence, this is an example how Muslims can help Christians to see a truth which is not part of their conscience.