

# "Where would we end up?"

## Towards an Ecumenical Hermeneutic of Co-operation between Mainstream and Migrant Churches in Germany

Sören Asmus

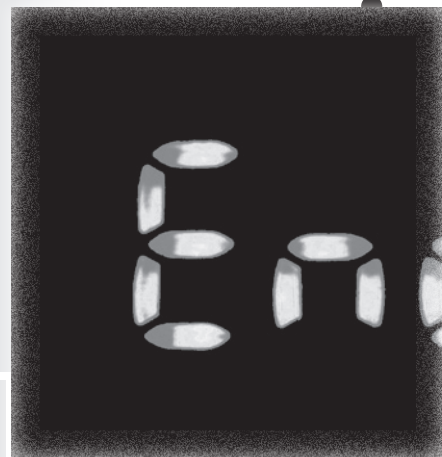
*The presence of migrants in Europe is not only a challenge for the secular politics of integration or an opportunity for face-to-face Christian-Muslim dialogue; it is also a challenge to the ecumenical co-existence of different church families. It calls not only for change in the lives of the migrants, but also for a departure from well-known understandings in the resident society and the mainline churches there. This challenge and call for change is often answered by strategies of defence. In German there is the description of this attitude saying: "Where would we end up, if...", trying to name the dangers of change. However, the German poet Erich Fried coined the saying: "Where would we end up, if everyone asks: 'Where would we end up', and no-one would go and see, where we would end up?" The following text shall give some constructive ideas of how the mainline churches could go forth and see where we might end up, if we open up to change.*

### Introduction

While migration within Europe after the religious wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century led to the presence of different Christian communities next to each other, it usually was restricted to the co-existence of close theological communities in which the relationship on a theological level was sort of settled. The historic peace churches and other free churches tried to establish a politically secured right of existence; and the migrants from the mainline churches sooner or later became part of the predominant structures. After the introduction of secular states and the political independence of religious communities, the situation of



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the smaller churches improved and it became a question of ecumenical relationships—as far as those existed. Nevertheless, theological questions were still based on post-reformation conflicts, or—as in the case of the Orthodox parishes in Western Europe—on part of the theological heritage. Today, however, the growing number of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches poses a new kind of challenge to theological discourse, to the ecclesiastic praxis and the ecumenical hermeneutics of mainline churches, as well as to the established free churches. The following text shall try to suggest some basics for the ecumenical encounter between mainline churches and migrant churches. It is based on the perception of the German situation and written from the point of view of a minister of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland, one of the mainline churches involved in dialogue with migrant churches.

First, I will try to suggest certain prerogatives for the perception of the ecumenical situation; secondly, I will give some theological basics in order to suggest an ecumenical hermeneutic of moving forward and accepting difference.

## 1) A question of Perception:

The first necessary step in analysing the situation is some kind of *reality-check*. On one hand, social awareness of the migrant situation is often blurred by prejudices which sometimes were adequate in the past, but do not fit the situation of the present generations of people with migrant backgrounds—as is the case in Germany. Especially in regard to Christian migrants, an attitude of “helping those in need” is prevalent in the churches. This is due to the real social situation of some migrants, but does not fit on the ecclesial level as many of the migrant churches have their own functioning structures and a quite established self-awareness in matters of faith. It is inadequate to treat these communities as if they need protection or paternalistic support. Here, in each case, it is necessary to look at the real state of affairs, especially as most migrant churches expect a brotherly approach of theologically equal partners.

Also, the churches should become aware of the *shared history in the religious field*. In discussions of religious and cultural attitudes, a perception of some kind of traditionalism among migrants is prevalent. This view, however, usually is shaped by a limited view of the mainline churches’ own history. While having faced the challenge of secularisation and enlightenment in Europe, they have a specific way of dealing with their own religious tradition and a reflected sort of language in faith matters. The mainline churches see the way of constructing religious identity and speaking of faith matters from side of the migrants as a mode of thinking which they have already overcome.

However, as the studies on the Diaspora identities of migrants by STUART HALL and others in the sociological field, as well as by WALTER HOLLENWEGER and ROSWITH GERLOFF in the theological realm, have shown: presenting a specific kind of religious and cultural identity in the resident society is never a quotation of tradition from “home”, but a way to position one’s community in the discourse of the resident society. The way it is presented is dependent on the social and legal

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circumstances in the place of residence, as well as on the resources in intellectual and religious matters which are acceptable in the given situation. This, however, only becomes possible if the focus is not on the single church's history but on the shared religious history in a given society. Thus the models and patterns of religious identity articulation can surface and it is possible to access them adequately.

Having thus settled the specific experiences with migrant churches in an appropriate framework, it is necessary to have a *fair look at the levels of comparison and communication*. In regard to the different levels of communication, it is a question of comparing similar elements. Thus, it would be not only unfair but wrong and falsifying if, for instance, the fully fledged theological capacity of the ecumenical department of a mainline church talks with the single pastor of a migrant church to establish a theological dialogue. Here the appropriate level of communication is with international Charismatic, Pentecostal or Orthodox Institutions. On the other hand, it is only fair to compare the capacity of a migrant church with the mainline church parish face to face. Here similar opportunities and challenges are given. It is the specific structure of migrant churches that in each single case one has to establish whether the local branch is the autonomous head of a community, the local branch of an international church community or a theological network—as in many cases of charismatic-pentecostal churches.

Finally the mainline churches have to be *honest about their own interests and perspectives*. In the religious field of any society the mainline churches are actors, trying to establish or maintain their position in social or political structures. They have their own interests, independent of the migrant churches, which they tend to carry around in hidden agendas. When representing “the Christian community” of a country, it is only too obvious that mainline churches try to play down the impact or importance of migrant churches in the public realm. At the same time, there are of course differences in theological attitudes within the mainline churches, in which case the migrant churches might be used as an external

ally or as negative examples of attitudes which do not have any stronger influence within the church.

## 2) A question of theological basics

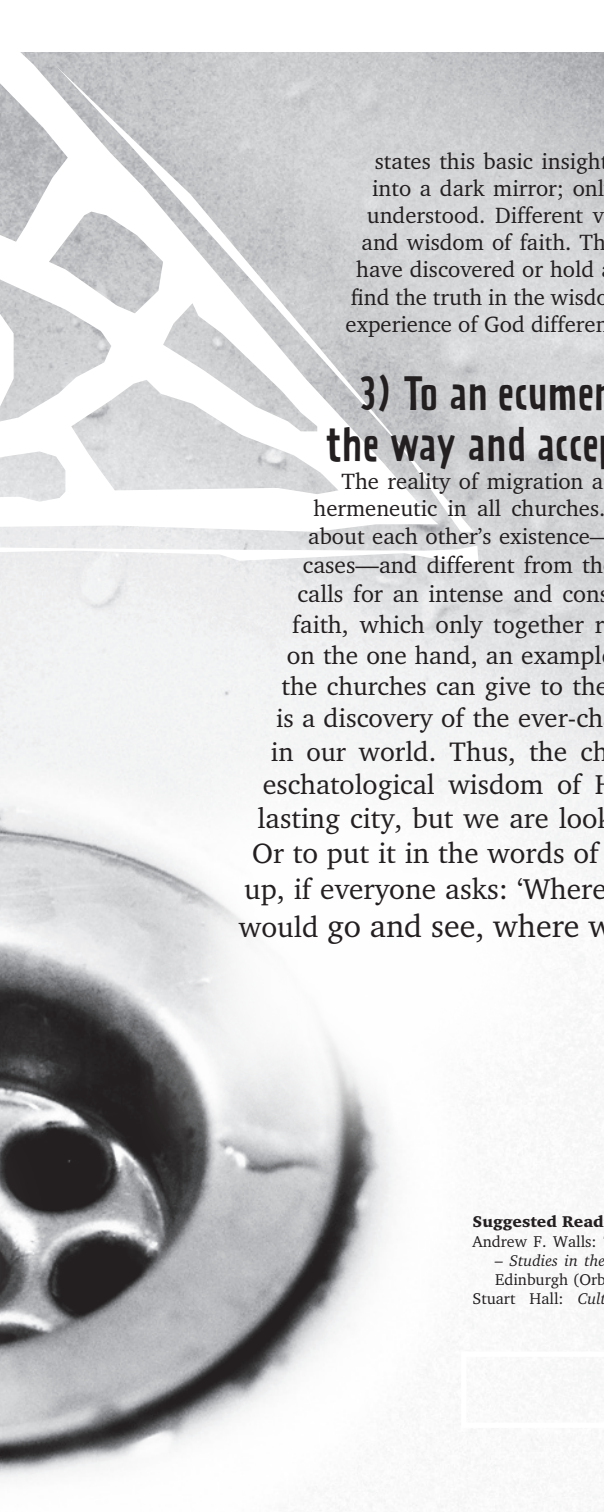
The above stated attitudes are not reasoned in some kind of “political correctness”, but are based on important theological imperatives. These are biblically based but speak also in a context of modern theology.

The first basic insight is given by Eph. 2:19-22, which ANDREW WALLS calls the “*Ephesian moment*” of theology. It is imperative for churches and communities to realise that they all form the body of Christ, wherein different traditions and structures are equal but different incarnations of the biblical message and the life of faith. In Paul's times, this was the community of Jewish and gentile churches in the Mediterranean; today we need to look closely at the different traditions in order to realise the need for the other. In the words of WALLS:

While it is legitimate, of course, to value ones own tradition and perspective on Christ as true to the Gospel, one should still be open to the chance of *discovering Christ in the other*. As Matthew 25:31-46 puts it: we might meet Christ without knowing in the others, to whom we relate in love and support. Based on the works of EMANUEL LEVINAS, a whole theology of “the Other” has come into being, confirming this attitude. I face the truth in the face of the other and in her challenge to my ethical and social action from which I am and from which I am not.

Further more, we always need to be aware of the *limited status of our theological knowledge and our faith*. Again, Paul





states this basic insight in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:12: We are only able to look into a dark mirror; only at the end of time will we understand as we are understood. Different views, therefore, are only a part of the knowledge and wisdom of faith. The difficulty lies not in the defence of that which I have discovered or hold as true, but in the honest and thorough attempt to find the truth in the wisdom previously unknown to my community or in the experience of God different from my own.

### **3) To an ecumenical hermeneutics of being on the way and accepting difference**

The reality of migration and Diaspora in Europe calls for an ecumenical hermeneutic in all churches. Living together is more than “just” knowing about each other’s existence—which in itself would be something in many cases—and different from the assimilation of different ways of belief. It calls for an intense and consequent reflection of the different ways of faith, which only together represent Christ in our societies. This is, on the one hand, an example of co-operation and integration which the churches can give to the rest of society. On the other hand, it is a discovery of the ever-changing ways in which God is present in our world. Thus, the chance lies in the awareness of the eschatological wisdom of Hebrews 13:14: “For we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Or to put it in the words of the poet: “Where would we end up, if everyone asks: ‘Where would we end up’, and no-one would go and see, where we would end up?”

#### **Suggested Reading:**

Andrew F. Walls: *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*  
– *Studies in the Transmission of Faith*; Maryknoll, New York,  
Edinburgh (Orbis, T&T Clark) 2002.  
Stuart Hall: *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, in: Jonathan

Rutherford (Ed.): *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*;  
London (Lawrence and Wishart) 1990; pp.: 222-237.

Roswith Gerloff: *Das schwarze Lächeln Gottes – Afrikanische Diaspora als Herausforderung an Theologie und Kirche*; Frankfurt a.M. (Lembeck) 2005. (Some Articles in English).

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