

Crossing Borders: Report on an Indian-German Experiment

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Abstract: This article deals with a particular experience of crossing borders, a cross-cultural conference on *Faith-formation* in India and Germany, which took place in Mumbai about a decade ago. In fact, it became a performative adventure across cultural borders. This report by Christian Bauer reflects on that Mumbai-experience, organised by the JDV in Pune and the *Faculty of Catholic Theology* of the University of Tübingen. As the narrative “we” in the beginning shows, the author of this report had a double-role as participant and as observer of the conference at the same time. This participant observation is connected with the delightful experience of meeting Kurien Kunnumpuram for the first time.

The author describes the dynamics and nuances involved in such a complex encounter on faith formation. Reflecting theologically he concludes that inter-religious dialogue will not have to seek an utopic identity of the different, but instead it will have to mediate real differences of the identical. This theological turn from abstract identities on the level of theoretical ideas to concrete differences on the level of practical problems brings about changes within the religions taking part in that kind of dialogue – as an Indian participant illustrated at the conference in Mumbai. Many *Small Christian Communities* shift from being “agents for a change within the church” towards *Small Human Communities*, becoming “agents for a change in society”, who discover common concerns in the light of the gospel, since there is “no Muslim-electricity, no Christian-toilet, no Hindu-road”

Keywords: Borders; Cross-cultural encounter; Faith-formation; Inter-religious dialogue; Practical theology.

We experienced practically what we knew theoretically, because we were doing what we were talking about. Our cross-cultural conference on *Faith-formation* in India and Germany, which took place in Mumbai (January 12-17, 2003), happened to become a performative adventure across cultural borders. This report reflects on that Mumbai-experience, organised by the JDV in Pune and the *Faculty of Catholic Theology* of the University of Tübingen. As the narrative “we” in the beginning shows, the author of this report had a double-role as participant and as observer of the conference at the same time. This participant observation is connected with the delightful experience of meeting Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ for the first time. He is one of the most impressive theologians I ever met.

1. Universes of Meaning

In his welcoming speech at the beginning of the conference, Prof. Francis D’Sa SJ pointed out that two different “universes of meaning” would be going to meet in Mumbai – the German universe of meaning, represented by seven participants from Tübingen, and the Indian universe of meaning, represented by 28 participants from all over India. These 35 participants of the conference constituted an extremely diverse audience, including academic and non-academic theologians of both sexes: men (mainly priests: 17 participants) and women (mainly religious: 8 participants) – only decision-takers as bishops were missing. “Each culture we are representing”, D’Sa said, “is a universe of meaning on its own and the entire world is constituted by many different universes of meaning – that means by a radical plurality of different cultural mind-sets.” In other words: When German ‘Geist’ meets Indian ‘Atma’, this plurality of differences demands a human openness in the spirit of cross-cultural encounter, that first of all means to respect the universe of meaning of the Other attentively and patiently: “We are not here for teaching doctrines, but for sharing experiences and reflections.” (Francis D’Sa). This wise opening remark helped to understand and manage

the “clash of cultures” we had to face during the conference, namely that clash of different styles of discourse. Thus our Indo-German experiment was not only an intellectual endeavour, but also an existential challenge.

2. Reciprocal Fascination

At first there was more fascination for the Other than cultural irritation on both sides. It was just great to meet each other – and the papers at the beginning of the conference were enriching the enthusiastic start. The first three sessions were dealing with pastoral practices of faith-formation in India, that is the *Small Christian Communities* (= SCCs) represented by Ashley Nazareth, Aloysius D’Souza, Patrick D’Mello, Felix D’Souza, Gilbert de Lima, their practice of *Gospel Sharing* (Elvin Colaco), the *Bombay Archdiocesan Catechetical Project* (Aniceto Pereira) and the *Christbhakta Movement* in Benares (Anil Dev, Sajeev Rakesh). The German participants were fascinated by the richness of that large field of pastoral work during the first day of the conference. This was culturally embodied and spiritually deepened by the rite of the lighting of the lamp at the beginning, the ‘dramatised’ celebration of the Eucharist (Michael Gonsalvez) before lunch and a performance of Classical Indian Dance (Kala Darshini) in the evening. Especially the inculturated style of liturgy, confronting the “drama of the last supper” with the “drama of our life”, was a deep spiritual experience for us: “Germans are less inculturated in their own culture”, as Dean Ottmar Fuchs said. This holistic approach of the conference opened the first doors of understanding for the German participants.

3. Bridging a Gap

After that first day, marked by a shared euphoria, the participants experienced a certain disillusionment during the second day of the conference. The day was opened by a brilliant theological overview by Prof. Kurien Kunnumpuram of *Faith-Formation in the Context of India Today*, trying to bridge the discursive gap between the more experience-based Indian papers of the first day and the more reflection-based papers from Tübingen that were to follow. Off course, all Indian contributions of the first day were also – in some

cases (e. g. the SCC-paper) explicitly – theological papers as well as all German papers of the second day were also – again in some cases (e. g. Kilian Nuss) explicitly – practical papers. Nonetheless, the main focus of the first papers was on practical problems, whereas the following papers mainly focused theological problems.

4. Discursive Irritations

As the first German, Prof. Bernd Jochen Hilberath (Systematic Theology) spoke about *The Shift in Dogmatics*, followed by Fr. Kilian Nuss on *Training for the Priesthood in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart*, Dr. Bernhard Nitsche (Systematic Theology) on *What Philosophical Approaches does Contemporary Theology Encounter and Need?* and Prof. Ottmar Fuchs (Practical Theology) on *Identity and Relevance of Practical Theology*. In this long day of lectures – without much discussion because of the shortage of time – the participants enjoyed a change only during the celebration of the Eucharist and the performance of Classical Indian Dance. There was a certain note of discontent coming up, because the German contributions seem to have caused this clash of discursive styles. These contributions were criticised as being too many and too long, academically abstract and didactically unprepared. There was a great need for more communication, interaction and participation in group-discussions that brought up a real danger to fall off dialogue during the second day.

5. New Dynamics

The third morning with German and Indian speakers offered various forms of discussion – open general sessions, discussions in small groups – and a certain ease of the previous day's tensions. Prof. Albert Biesinger (Religious Education) decided to change the issue of his paper and spoke more experience-based about *Family Catechesis in Latin America and Germany*. When Kilian Nuss spoke about his parish-priest experiences with this pastoral concept in the following discussion, the conference arrived at its crucial turning-point. Many Indians got involved for the first time, because finally they came in touch with German experiences in an existential way. This pastoral statement functioned as an eye-opener for the Indian

perception of the European church, which had mainly been seen as an old and dying church. This fruitful dialogue was followed by two papers focused on interreligious and intercultural questions of faith formation: Dr. Clemens Mendonca (Institute for the Study of Religion) spoke about *Interreligious Education in India* and Prof. Monika Scheidler (Religious Education and Catechetics) about *Catechesis and Intercultural Competence*. It seems to be a significant detail that each of these two contributions of women was able to combine “Indian” practicability and “German” reflexivity within an integral way of discourse.

6. Group Discussions

From now on both sides were learning from each other, and a deeper understanding could take place. A general session for the gathering of subjects for further group discussions followed, that constituted small groups on *community*, *faith formation* and *theology* with Fr. Ashley Nazareth, Sr. Patricia Santos and Fr. Joy Pulickan as speakers. Focusing on these exemplary issues, it became possible to sum up the following process by combining three key-words: Church, dogma and borders. These topics emerging from the dynamics of the three discussion groups and the following plenary sessions are deeply interrelated to each other, because as “de-finitions”¹ of a community’s belief dogmata “de-fine”² the borders of the church – and raised the following, very lively discussed questions:

- Church as community: United diversity or diverse unities?
- Dogma as de-finition: Borders to be crossed or sources of experience?
- Borders of the church: Necessary limits or caging boundaries?

7. Church as Community

Because of the diversity of the conference’s participants and their experiences, the tension between unity and diversity became a virulent topic: What does “catholic” mean? Is the value of unity superior or inferior to the value of diversity? Should the church be a community in the sense of “unity integrating diversity”? Or better in

the sense of “diversity searching for unity” (Jacob Theckanath)? Questions like these led the discussion to some constitutive ambiguities, which characterise the dialectical character of any community, within and outside church. There is a great need of balancing introverted and extroverted groups, centripetal and centrifugal forces, individual and social options at every level of the church, from the Curia in Rome to the Indian SCCs. Members of a mature, well balanced community should neither be dependent nor independent of one another but rather be “interdependent” (Francis D’Sa). As such an interdependent community of local communities, the global church is no end in itself – because its own mission turns the church to a community, that is pushed beyond all borders by its founding vision. It is a decisive experience, witnessed by the SCC-representatives, that shared visions and missions automatically “unite communities” (Patrick de Mello). “It is our mission that heals”, added Jakob Theckanath, quoting the Roman post-synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia*: “Community is for mission, mission for community” (EA 24).

8. Faith Formation as a Crossing of Borders

The Roman “re-definition”³ of the church’s boundaries and the Indian vision of a “church without boundaries”⁴ were the two poles of our discussion about faith formation. There was a mediating position, arguing that the question should not be, whether we needed church-constitutive boundaries at all, but rather: What kind of boundaries do we need? As Prof. Rudi Heredia said, without boundaries “we are lost in space”. Borders constitute the “inside” and “outside” of the Church as a community, uniting and dividing things and people at the same time. Despite this basic need of any community, all participants agreed that Jesus Christ has to be seen as a true “boundary-breaker”⁵ and that the Church needs “liminal persons” (Jacob Theckanath), who follow his way of reaching out beyond borders. Fr. Anil Dev’s project of a Christian Ashram in Varanasi, which offers a place for “liminal identities as Hindu-Christian or Christian-Buddhist”⁶ within the Church, was mentioned as a good example of that. This project stands in a theological line with Raimon Pannikar’s existential Credo of crossing over: “I left

as a Christian, I found myself a Hindu and I return a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.”⁷ Liminal persons like Pannikar could help us to create a borderline-theology, which enables Christians to develop their own identity by crossing the boundaries of their communities’:

“Crossing the borders is a way of finding one’s identity [...]. It is a way of enriching oneself, widening one’s horizons, broadening one’s knowledge, discovering oneself in this process.”⁸

The most used metaphor during the conference was that of “border” – and related words as boundary, frontier and limit. These words show, that there is no single English translation for the polyvalent meaning of the German word “Grenze” (= border, boundary, frontier or limit). That fact of language is a sign of the general problem, that we cannot have only one single border-practice in the church, but rather many plural practices: God’s people has to respect foreign borders, pull down old boundaries, discover new frontiers and reach out to its limits at the same time.

9. Theology as Critical Hermeneutics of Dogma

The lively debates on dogma and experience during the conference revealed that – using a basic distinction of Gottlob Frege – defining the sense of the word dogma is no major problem, rather its meaning causes theological differences. One could easily get the impression that for many Indian participants of the conference dogma and experience were contradictory notions and that good theology in general has to be experience-based and thus of necessarily dogma-critical. In contrast to this, Systematic and Practical Theology in Tübingen stand for a project of working out the existential dimension of dogma as a source and fruit of personal and social experience. The aim is to make dogma relevant for new experiences (and the other way around!), against all dogmatism of doctrine and beyond any identification of theology and doctrine. In order to mediate these to different uses of the word dogma, it may help to speak of dogma (in singular) and dogmata (in plural)⁹ in the line of Karl Rahner’s distinction of mystery and mysteries⁹. According to a basic distinction in the Cultural Anthropology of Michel de Certeau¹⁰, that difference

of both constitutes “places” of stable dogmata within the “space” of dynamic dogma – just see the concepts of “loci theologici” and “lieux théologiques en acte” in Melchior Cano and M.-Dominique Chenu. Dogmatic “de-finitions” circumscribe places structured by the spatial outside of the Other, that means by non-discursive practises, which enable to cross their borders. This transcendence of discursive borders allows an experience- and dogma-based theology at the same time, that is tracing significant places of God’s mystery named “makom”¹¹ in the space of the mysteries of our daily life, that is a taking place (“stattfinden”) of God, when and where he takes a place (“Statt finden”).

10. Different Language Games

What really happened in Mumbai? No doubt, all of us experienced the very basic necessities of this cross-cultural encounter as a real challenge. We had to face more simple problems caused by the limitations of language, for instance the problem of speaking and understanding Indian English (“Hinglish”) and German English (“Ginglish”). More complex, compared to this challenge, was the problem of translating senses and meanings from one discursive language game to the other. All these different languages build up universes of meaning within their own world, the games of which follow different rules: “The limits of my language are the borders of my world”¹².

11. Productive Misunderstandings

Even our misunderstandings became debate-energizers which brought about vital and lively discussions. As Francis D’Sa said at the end of the final session: “It was fascinating, how we misunderstood each other”. A striking example of these productive misunderstandings he gave during a reflection after the conference. In his article *Mystery of Christ and Doctrine of Avatara*¹³ Joseph Neuner interpreted the Hindu doctrine of Avatara in the light of the Christian heresy of Docetism, summed up by Francis D’Sa in the sentence “As if God became man”¹⁴. He argued against his fellow Jesuit, that not only the title of this article should be *Mystery of Avatara and Doctrine of Christ*¹⁵, but also that the judgement of

Avatara as Docetism is based on a misunderstanding of Indian anthropology. For Hindus man basically means an unredeemed being within the circle of birth and rebirth – and Krishna was really man, transcending all these contingencies precisely like Christ, who – according to scripture and tradition – was “similar to us in all, except sin” (Heb 4, 15/Council of Calcedon).

12. Internal Differences

We had not only to face linguistic misunderstandings along cultural borders, but also differences within our cultures. The latter line of conflict crossed the basic borderline between India and Germany, because often not only Germans and Indians disagreed in certain points, but also Indians and Germans among one another. There were, for example, Indian voices in contradiction to the other voices quoted above, who named the “high level” of the German reflections “stimulating” and “exciting”. So one specific cross-cultural borderline was uniting academic theologians from India and dividing them from non-professional theologians from their own culture. This way Mumbai became a meeting point for different movements within the Indian church, representing its great “power in diversity” (Clemence Mendonca). As a result of that, there was a certain consciousness coming up during the conference that within God’s people not only Indians and Germans can learn from each other, but also Indians from Indians and Germans from Germans.

13. Embodied Hermeneutics

Even if we did not manage to understand each other completely in this complex learning process, we experienced a personal encounter in Mumbai, which is the embodied condition of the possibility of any dialogue. Incarnating the abstract idea of dialogue into flesh, we have to turn Immanuel Kant’s transcendental problem into an embodied discourse, defusing Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hidden idealism. There is no cultural hermeneutics of ideas as “fusion of horizons”¹⁶ without real encounter of bodies, even pure hermeneutics of texts is not possible without an existential encounter with these texts. During the conference this constitutive need brought about a “compassionate listening”¹⁷ among the participants, which made a

real – that is: embodied¹⁸ – dialogue in the sense of Nelle Mortons concept of a theological “hearing to speech” possible: “In the beginning was hearing”¹⁹.

14. Concluding Feedbacks

At the end of the conference we had a final sharing by giving feedback to the conference. Many participants highlighted the importance of the face-to-face-experiences – especially during meal-times, tea-breaks and get-togethers in the evening. These moments of informal dialogue helped to bridge the gap between different mind-sets and enabled many participants to “enter the universe of the other” (Monika Scheidler). We not only experienced an intellectual sharing of ideas, but also an existential sharing of life “and cigarettes” (Ottmar Fuchs). These shared cigarettes’ are a symbol of the theological significance of the conference as an hour of grace, which made us encounter new Indian or German “friends” (Sr. Teresa Peter). The development of this cross-cultural friendship was not hard work to be done, but rather a gift to be received – because at least it was granted by grace. As far as there is no grace separated from nature, we have experienced gratefully this encounter of heads and hearts: “Your heart is warmer than your brain” (Sr. Jaisy Varickamthotty). It was also mentioned in the final sharing, that it was encouraging to see that “all these great theologians are also struggling” (Sr. Lucy Kurien), or more ironically: “Even intellectual theologians have stories to tell” (Fr. Michael Gonsalves). This heart-touching quality of encounter leads, as Bernd-Jochen Hilberath said, to the spiritual experience of the Easter encounter with the living Christ on his way to Emmaus, which made the hearts of the disciples burn.

15. Theological Outlook

Speaking for the German participants at the end of the conference, Dean Ottmar Fuchs concluded: “This conference was a first step and we cannot calculate its impact for the future yet.” A first step towards what? In what direction do we have to go? What kind of theology do we need for stepping forward? This question, raised during our final session, leads back to another crucial point of the

conference, which made many Indian participants get in touch with German experiences existentially. At the end of the final session, Ottmar Fuchs confessed that the Nazi-experience during the ‘Third Reich’ (1933-1945) is a central motivation for his generation, born between 1944 and 1948, for doing theology with an ideology-critical approach, that aims to uncover the “subversive power of dogma” (Ottmar Fuchs) as a source of resistance. This includes the insight into its relativity in the sense of a relational involvement into the contingency of its own socio-historical context – with consequences for our concept of interreligious dialogue, for example:

“When people speak about community among religions they [...] say: All religions [...] lead to the same God as all rivers lead to the sea. [...] Such a view [...] does not take seriously the differences among religions. [...] Precisely because of such serious differences it is not possible to adopt a superior point of view that talks about [...] the religions from a higher level. Such a [...] neutral point of view is not maintainable.”²⁰

Because of that, inter-religious dialogue will not have to seek a utopic identity of the different, but instead it will have to mediate real differences of the identical. This theological turn from abstract identities on the level of theoretical ideas to concrete differences on the level of practical problems brings about changes within the religions taking part in that kind of dialogue – as an Indian participant illustrated at our conference in Mumbai. Many *Small Christian Communities* (SCCs) shift from being “agents for a change within the church” towards *Small Human Communities* (SHCs), becoming “agents for a change in society”, who discover common concerns in the light of the gospel: “There is no Muslim-electricity, no Christian-toilet, no Hindu-road” (Allwyn D’Silva).

Notes

1. From Latin “finis” = limit, border.
2. In the sense of a “circum-scription” of its borders.
3. Cf. EA 14 and Dominus Jesus.

4. Cf. A. AMALADASS and R. ROCHA (Ed.), *Crossing the Borders. Essays in Honour of Francis X. D'Sa on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, Chennai 2001.
5. J. PARAPPALLY, "Jesus, the boundary-breaker: The revelation of what it means to be human," in: AMALADASS and ROCHA: *Crossing Borders*, 243-254, 243.
6. M. AMALADASS, Do we need borders between religions? A reflection on identity and difference, in: Amaladass and Rocha: *Crossing Borders*, 12-24, 24.
7. R. PANNIKAR, *The Interreligious Dialogue*, New York 1978, 4.
8. AMALADASS, "Conquest of the quarters (digvijaya). The quest for identity," in: AMALADASS and ROCHA: *Crossing Borders*, 151-167, 167. See also Kuruvilla PANDIKATTU, *Dialogue as Way of Life*, Mumbai, 1998.
9. K. RAHNER, "Über den Begriff des Geheimnisses in der katholischen Theologie," in K. RAHNER: *Schriften zur Theologie* (Band IV), Einsiedeln-Zürich-Köln 1967, 51-99.
10. Cf. M. de CERTEAU: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 1974.
11. "Makom", the Hebrew word for place, is used in Jewish tradition as a name of God (cf. Philo of Alexandria: *De Somniis* I, 63). According to Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida one can understand "makom" as a name of God in the double-sense of the French expression "avoir lieu", that means "taking place" as well as "taking a place" (cf. J.-F. LYOTARD, *Philosophie und Malerei im Zeitalter ihres Experimentierens*, Berlin 1986, 20f; J. DERRIDA, *Wie nicht sprechen. Verneinungen*, Wien 1989, 48).
12. Cf. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 5.6.: „Die Grenzen einer Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt" (L. WITTGENSTEIN: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Tagebücher 1914-1916. Philosophische Untersuchungen* [Werkausgabe Band I]; Frankfurt/M. 2000, 67).
13. Cf. P. NEUNER, "Das Christus-Mysterium und die indische Lehre von den Avataras," in: A. GRILLMEYER and H. BACHT (Ed.): *Das Konzil von Chalkedon. Geschichte und Gegenwart III*, Würzburg 1954, 785-824.
14. Emphasis: Ch. B.
15. Cf. F. D'SA, "Christian Incarnation and Hindu Avatara," in: *Concilium* 2 (1993), 77-85 (fn. 8).
16. "Horizontverschmelzung" (cf. H.-G. GADAMER: *Truth and Method*, New York 2000 [1960], 397). Gadamer defines 'horizon' as the „range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (ibid., 302).

17. Cf. M. ROSENBERG, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, Del Mar 1999.
18. Cf. Ch. BAUER, "The Railway Bridge of Shirampur. 'Hearing to Speech' (N. Morton) as Embodied Hermeneutics," in: K. PANDIKATTU and J. PONNIAH (Ed.), *The Dancing Peacock. Indian Insights into Religion and Development*, New Delhi 2010, 259-263.
19. Nelle Morton created a feminist theology of liberation on the basis of experiences in women-groups: „In the beginning was not the Word. In the beginning was the hearing. [...] We experienced God, as Spirit, hearing human beings to speech – to new creation. [...] The creative act of the Spirit was not Word speaking, but hearing – hearing the created to speech." (N. MORTON, *The Journey is Home*, Boston 1985, 41/82). In that context Nelle Morton invented new metaphors for God: „It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that first I received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. [...] [God as a] great ear at the heart of [...] our common life – hearing human beings to speech – to our own speech." (ibid., 127). See also Kuruvilla PANDIKATTU, *TAMAS*, Jnanam 2005.
20. AMALADOSS, *Do We Need Borders between Religions?*, 13.