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Difference without Domination

Mutual Inspiration of the Abrahamic Faiths in Times of Rising Polarization

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I write this article in the spirit of an understanding of theology as an exercise of imagination. Any truly *theological* look at the world, I suggest, is a look that imagines what the world in all its destructiveness and conflict could look like otherwise, i.e. in accordance with God's will for creation. A theological perspective as I understand it cannot but contrast current narratives of strife with narratives of reconciliation in tune with an eschatological understanding of the world. Thus, I am not proposing here concrete steps for the encounter between representatives from the Abrahamic religions but rather trying to stir the imagination for practitioners to take such steps informed by a theological reimagination of the world.

As theologian I routinely cherish voices from outside my field since they broaden my horizon and grant insights into specific topics which would not have been possible from a "purely" theological perspective. Therefore, I want to start my reflections on migration and the Abrahamic faith communities not by tackling the topics head on, but by reflecting on a conversation between two cosmopolitans, a conversation that throws light on the relation between faith and migration and indeed can help us to reimagine this relation. My reflection on this conversation are meant to set the tone for what I want to argue from a theological perspective, to be a prism through which I want to look at questions of migration and religion.

The extended conversation took place at several instances between the conductor Daniel Barenboim and the literary critic Edward W. Said around the turn of the century. Ara Guzelimian edited this conversation under the title *Parallels and Paradoxes. Explorations in Music and Society*.¹ From an ethnic or religious perspective, Barenboim and Said are unlikely partners. Barenboim comes from a Jewish tradition, Said from an Oriental Christian tradition, and what makes them even more unlikely as partners is the fact that Said is Palestinian and Barenboim Israeli. But music unites them, and in 1999 they together founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra² in Weimar, the city where the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote his *West-Eastern Divan* in which he famously claimed that Orient and Occident cannot be divided. The vision of the intimate interrelation between Occident and Orient is in dire need of revival in our days when polarization between cultures and religions seems to be “the new normal”. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra purposefully is made up of musicians from both Arab and Israeli territories. Through music it practices in a constructive and beautiful way this interrelation of Occident and Orient and has become a symbol for peaceful coexistence across difference. And I think it also can be understood as a model for peaceful *religious* coexistence among the three Abrahamic faiths.

¹ Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said (Ara Guzelimian, ed.), *Parallels and Paradoxes. Explorations in Music and Society*, New York, NY: Vintage Books 2004.

² Webpage of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra: <https://www.west-eastern-divan.org/>
Introductory Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=253&v=K22pkacxfN0
West-East Orchestra Finds Gulf Harmony: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=45&v=pgNMkZefHh0
West-Eastern Divan Orchestra: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/27125969>

Identity without Singularity – Difference without Domination – Participation without Exclusion

I want to highlight three reflections in this conversation which to my mind are of significance both for our situation of migration and for the interrelation between the Abrahamic faiths. First, a notion of identity as fluid is put forward, second, the need to promote difference and at the same time to reject domination is articulated, and third, music is affirmed as an experiential medium in which participation without exclusion becomes possible.

First the question of *identity*: The conversation between Barenboim and Said is set off by Guzelimian's provoking question to the two world citizens, where they feel at home, and Barenboim answers that his "feeling of being at home somewhere is really a feeling of transition". He is happiest, he maintains, when he "can be at peace with the idea of fluidity".³ And in a similar vein Said reflects on identity as "a set of currents, flowing currents, rather than a fixed place or a stable set of objects."⁴ To me some version of such a dynamic understanding of identity is of utter importance especially in times when so many people feel that their identity is threatened because of migration and that therefore "the other" needs to be rejected. To perform music well, Said reflects, "one has to accept the idea that one is putting one's own identity to the side in order to explore the 'other'."⁵ Later Barenboim would second such an understanding of identity, especially as it is expressed in music. Every human being, he asserts, needs to first achieve his/her own identity, "then have the courage to let that identity go in order to find the way back. I think this is what music is about."⁶ This applies

³ Barenboim/Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

to any real human encounter, I believe, but also for the act of reading and interpreting, not least interpreting Holy Scripture: One's own identity is continuously shaped by what one is not yet. For Barenboim, music is a way of dealing with and expressing the fluidity and transience of life as a whole. In music, he says, you "learn to live with the fluidity of life ... Every development, every departure, means leaving something behind."⁷ So, what is identity amid life's dynamic interactions, interrelations and developments? It certainly cannot be understood as *one* stable entity through time. It is not singular, instead it is composite and develops through time. Identities, especially religious identities, are complex and never hermetically sealed off from their surroundings. To construct them as sealed off runs the risk of invoking violence against others. But the "other", other influences, other intuitions, other formations are always part of one's identity, and if you suppress all of that, "if you suppress an important element of yourself," Barenboim says, "you are constrained in your dealings with others". And he continues: "In my opinion it is impossible for anyone at the beginning of the twenty-first century to believably claim a single identity."⁸ The ability to acknowledge the multiplicity of one's own identity and the possibility to reconcile multiple aspects *within* one's own identity seems to me to be an important precondition for peaceful coexistence across various differences. Often the problem is the lacking capacity to imagine and to affirm the value of multiple identity. I share Barenboim's conviction and indeed experience that "it is possible to have more than one identity at the same time and to accept that people of foreign origin, with foreign customs and foreign culture, can become part of one's own land without their threatening one's identity."⁹ The challenge then is – whether it is about cultural or

⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

⁸ Ibid., p. 170.

⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

religious identity – to become sensitive enough to the complexities of one’s own identity in order to be able to imagine common belonging across difference.

Second the question of *difference*: So often in the public discourse, difference in terms of culture, ethnicity, or religion is described in polarizing ways, i.e. in a way that pitches one against the other or depicts them as necessarily mutually exclusive. Populist leaders have been on the rise throughout the last years worldwide, and a sense of global competition has intensified, not only on the political arena. Therefore, I find Said’s reflections around difference very important also for the context of interreligious relations. In a quite solemn way he calls it “the basic human mission today” to preserve “difference without, at the same time, sinking into the desire to dominate”.¹⁰ To me, this is a formulation that also could be applied to respectful and attentive interreligious relations. The issue is not only to tolerate, but even to preserve differences and at the same time to allow these differences to enrich each other instead of competing with or even eclipsing each other. According to Said “the *humanistic mission* has to be able to maintain difference but without the domination and bellicosity that normally accompany affirmations of identity. And that’s very, very hard to do.”¹¹ Oftentimes we still are so steeped, not least in interreligious encounters, to think in terms of either/or and in terms of oppositions. But a separation of identities does not work, since at least the Abrahamic religions have different but intertwined histories.¹² Therefore, an affirmation of difference without the simultaneous attempt to change the other is a veritable challenge. What from a cultural and religious perspective seems so difficult, from a musical perspective, from the perspective of polyphony, becomes more understandable. What would a good piece

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 154.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 155. (my italics)

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 26f.

of music sound like if there wasn't the continuous play between differences, if there wasn't a very intentional but attentive insistence on one's own tonal identity? Domination would destroy the beauty of the polyphony, and so would homogeneity.

Third, the question of *participation*: To me the whole experiment with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is an exercise of unlikely participation, a participation that is shaped by the passing experience of music. While playing, the Palestinian musicians overcome their preconceptions about Israelis as nothing else but oppressors, and the Israeli musicians unlearn their prejudice about Palestinians as nothing else but terrorists. They just partake in the joy of music-making. It is a participation together of people who in most other settings would exclude each other. But this participation is a fleeting and fragile one, because sound as such is ephemeral and necessarily ends, becomes silence again.¹³ As soon as the music is over, there is the risk if not the likelihood that the musicians just return to their regular segregated settings and eventually forget this experience of being transformed by playing music together with musicians from other ethnic and religious communities. For non-exclusive participation to survive, the music must go on, which means that the playing together has to be risked again and again. The experience of creating something creative and beautiful together needs to be renewed continuously, and only during the performance itself division, injustice, oppression, and the mutual demonization are overcome. Music then can become a way of resisting the destructive forces of prejudice, suspicion, and exclusion. Indeed, it can create modes of belonging that expose constructed divisions along ethnic, religious or national lines as what they are: constructions. When you play Beethoven, it really cannot be of any significance whether the cello or the violin is played by an Israeli or a Palestinian musician. Together they

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 29f.

create an experience of wholeness while performing. And here, indeed, one can see an analogy between playing music and the life of faith. When the musicians really get immersed in the music the participation becomes holistic, or, as Barenboim puts it, “everything becomes permanently, constantly interdependent – it becomes indivisible”. And in this sense music-making becomes “comparable to religion [...] it cannot be divided”.¹⁴ Such healing indivisibility amidst destructive divisions is what music can accomplish and what faith is in the life of a human being.

But it is a struggle, a constant struggle to allow such indivisibility to break through amidst countless occasions of systematic division exercised by unjust systems and those willing to uphold them. This is something which migrants and refugees, people on the move, experience daily. Musical expression can be one way of performing resistance against divisive injustice. The West-East Divan Orchestra is one example; a more “down to earth” example is examined in a conversation between the two cultural critics Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in which they reflect on Hannah Arendt’s concern whether there are “modes of belonging that can be rigorously non-nationalistic”.¹⁵ Arendt’s reflections mirror the situation of migration after World War II, the conversation between Butler and Spivak reflect the current situation. Butler highlights a musical example of sorts to suggest that belonging and participation are complex issues not only in times of migration. And they cannot be settled once and for all by territorial or linguistic borders. Her example is from the wide spread demonstrations in 2006 “on the part of illegal residents [...] in various California cities”.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 156. – Barenboim several times emphasizes this aspect of intimate interdependency as a key aspect of the transforming power of music: “The musical experience, the act of making music, means to bring the sounds into a state of constant interdependency.” (112) “Music is exactly like the human body. The anatomy of music is exactly that: everything is always related.” (114)

¹⁵ Judith Butler & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?* London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010, 49.

During these demonstrations the “US national anthem was sung in Spanish as was the Mexican anthem. The emergence of ‘*nuestro himno*’ introduced the interesting problem of the plurality of the nation.”¹⁶ In her analysis Butler observes that “the ‘we’ to sing and to be assured in Spanish surely does something to our notions of the nation and to our notions of equality,” but also that “singing is a plural act, an articulation of plurality.”¹⁷ Reminiscent of Said’s emphasis on difference without domination, Butler then highlights “that equality is not a matter of extending or augmenting the homogeneity of a nation.”¹⁸ Instead the multilingual singing in the streets performs “a collectivity that comes to exercise its freedom in a language or a set of languages for which difference and translation are irreducible.”¹⁹ And with this collective singing in mind she concludes “that there can be no radical politics of change without performative contradiction.”²⁰ It is in this *performative contradiction* that I see an analogy both with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and with the practice of faith communities in general. The performative contradiction that happens when people sing the US American anthem in Spanish has analogies with the music-making of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. In the one case the singing contradicts the sharp division that often is created in the US between people speaking English and people speaking Spanish. A new plural identity is not only demanded but performed.²¹ In the other case, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra not only demands a weakening of the division between Israelis and Palestinians, but it

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

²¹ A very thought provoking resistance that can be compared with the singing of the US anthem in Spanish is the emergence of the Twitter conversation #MeTwo in the summer of 2018, initiated by the German-Turkish author Ali Can. It alludes to the big #metoo movement at the end of 2017 but does not communicate the victimization and objectification of women, but rather the systemic marginalization of people with double or multiple national/ethnic belonging. Cf. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/rassismuserfahrungen-metwo-aufbruch-oder-spaltung.862.de.html?dram:article_id=424510 (August 14, 2018)

performs it. Butler calls this phenomenon “*freedom in incipient form*: it starts to take what it asks for.”²² In both cases music becomes a means of transformation of rigid boundaries even if it only is momentary and transient as all music is.

The Abrahamic Faiths and Migration

This quite long introduction on the transformative and indeed reconciling potential of music is meant as a frame for the theological argument I want to make in the following connecting migration and the Abrahamic faiths. I consider the frame suggestive since in the practice of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra the issues of migration and faith are intertwined in as much as the musicians involved do have a background in one of the Abrahamic faiths and most of them do have an experience of migration themselves or have a family history shaped by migration. That would be true not least for the musicians from Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Music, of course, can also be used to manipulate and to overwhelm people emotionally in destructive ways. We do not have to go back to Augustine’s warning words regarding music to realize this. He cautioned his readers not to underestimate the potentially damaging role music can play in believers’ lives. And we know of such damaging use of music in the context of propaganda for authoritarian regimes. So, I am *not* suggesting here a reconciling, let alone a salvific function of music *as such*.

²² Butler&Spivak, *Who Sings?*, p. 68. (My italics)

Equally, justified critique could be voiced against the metaphor of the orchestra as an institution for the socially and culturally (and mostly also economically) privileged²³ and as a venue of hierarchical power relations. The critique against the bourgeois character of a classical orchestra is valid, which is why I do not want to privilege the classical orchestra *as such* over against other forms of musical performance but rather use it as an example for polyphonic communication, for an intricate mutual listening process. And in terms of the question of power, Barenboim has some intriguing observations to offer regarding the conductor who often is perceived as a “symbol of power [...] (T)he determination of the expression of music is in the players’ hands,”²⁴ he maintains, and this is the case because “(t)he first impulse has to come from the person who produces the sound.”²⁵ Keeping the primacy of the musicians’ agency in mind, one can even understand playing in an orchestra as an exercise “how to live in a democratic society [...] For when you do so, you learn when to lead and when to follow. You leave space for others and at the same time you have no inhibitions about claiming a place for yourself.”²⁶

What I *do* want to highlight by using the metaphor of the orchestra is the striking analogy between the dynamic relation among different voices and tunes in music and the necessarily diverse interaction among people of faith. What is required is both difference and mutual listening, i.e. identity and interaction with the other. When Barenboim defines music as “listening to the other” the same can be said for the life of faith. There is no mature religious

²³ I am grateful for a critical conversation about this issue with my precious colleagues Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Jong Chun Park and Joerg Rieger at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in August of 2018.

²⁴ Barenboim & Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, p. 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

identity among people from the Abrahamic faiths without a genuine willingness to listen to the religiously other.

When the Abrahamic faiths interact with each other in ever new ways in times of migration, the risk that they clash with each other increases, and the media is full of reports that just such clashes are happening, representatives of one religion claiming authority or priority over against the others, polarizing depictions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims abound, and the discussion whether or not Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship the same God never come to an end. It is especially under such heated conditions that a reimagination of the interrelation of and interdependence between the Abrahamic faiths is called for. Faith is always a lived reality and can never entirely be grasped with the help of doctrinal language. To understand interreligious relations *only* in terms of different doctrinal systems is to severely misunderstand the complex interrelations of peoples of faith. Not that doctrinal standards are unimportant, but they can always only give a frozen picture so to speak of any given religion. What I therefore want to do in this presentation by way of this introduction into matters of sound and aesthetics is to ask the siblings from the other Abrahamic faiths not so much *what* they believe but rather *how* they sing their songs and *how* they relate to the migratory identity of their own faith traditions.

During the latest years quite a bit of helpful research has been conducted highlighting the importance of migration in the Abrahamic faiths, and the conclusion is that in all three faiths migration plays a decisive role both in the collective memory, but also in the scriptural tradition.²⁷ These aspects in the various faith traditions are in need to be rediscovered and

²⁷ Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan (ed.), *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014. See also: Peter Admirand (2014), *The Ethics of Displacement and Migration in the Abrahamic Faiths: Enlightening Believers and Aiding Public Policy*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40:4, 671-687. Vol. 40, No. 4, p. 671–687.

reinterpreted in times of migration. Dale T. Irvin for one,²⁸ points out that migration in these three faith traditions even “is a trope of salvation”, exodus and exile being key contexts for Israel’s deliverance²⁹, and pilgrimage constituting the backbone of much of Christian and Muslim practice of faith.³⁰ And Peter Amirand highlights with reference to R. Hassan that God in the Hebrew Scriptures is depicted as a God who accompanies God’s people into exile³¹ and that in Islam *hijra*, “the notion of going into exile for the sake of God” is associated with the story of Hagar. Her fate is a precursor for the more central *hijra* in the Muslim tradition, the one Mohammed had to embark on when he fled from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.³² In a similar way as Irvin, Amirand wants to point toward the analogies between the three Abrahamic faiths in terms of their rootedness in stories of migration as key sites for divine presence and guidance. Hospitality toward the stranger, therefore, must belong to the core ethical challenges within all three faith traditions, and remembering the migratory context of many of the sacred texts is of special importance in times of the contested public discourse on migration.³³

Listening to the Religious Other to Deepen One’s Own Religious Identity

Indeed, when one is confronted with increasingly polarizing discourses on migration, the discovery how much in the Jewish-Christian, and even in the Muslim holy Scriptures is both thematizing migration or has migration as its concrete context, can become the first step toward developing a constructive and reconciliatory approach toward migration in times of

²⁸ Dale T. Irvin, *Theology, Migration, and the Homecoming*, in: Padilla&Phan, *Theology of Migration*, p. 7-25 (9).

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 11f.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 12-17.

³¹ Cf. Amirand, *The Ethics of Displacement and Migration*, p. 677.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 681.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 684.

polarization and populism. In times of migration representatives from the Abrahamic faiths meet more often, and I consider it of vital importance not too quickly to interpret these encounters in oppositional terms. As many have pointed out before me, in real life religions never meet each other as homogeneous opposing entities, but rather in form of the encounter among believers. And believers can always choose how to relate. I limit myself here to the relation among the three Abrahamic religions. [Listening to other religions as part of the deepening of one's own identity ... cf. mutual inclusivism etc.] As a Christian theologian I conclude this article by offering some reflections on the thoughts of a Jewish and a Muslim thinker respectively: the English Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and the German-Iranian scholar and writer Navid Kermani. They both strike me as thinkers who, amid polarizing and populist discourses on the assumed hostility of religions, talk about interreligious affairs in a constructive and reconciling tone.

Jonathan Sacks in his book *Not in God's Name. Confronting Religious Violence*³⁴ contests the increasingly common view that religion is the root cause of much violence. Instead Jonathan Sacks suggests understanding the relation between the three Abrahamic religions as a relation between siblings, and, of course, there is also rivalry between siblings. Sibling rivalry is part of the Jewish-Christian-Muslim narrative tradition, Sacks suggests, and it needs to be focused on if we want to understand and heal the hate that leads to violence in the name of God.³⁵ He then offers an intriguing reading of Genesis which to him is the book of sibling rivalry par excellence. And time and again he shows that the classic rivalries between Isaac and Ismael, between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers need not be

³⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in the Name of God. Confronting Religious Violence*, New York: Schocken Books 2015.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 92.

read in purely antagonistic terms, which is how much of the Christian tradition has read it. It is striking that these three main narratives about sibling rivalry include migration/flight as a key ingredient, and one could add: forced migration. Hagar is forced out of the house of Abraham, Jacob has to flee the wrath of Esau, and Joseph is sent into exile by his brothers against his will. The migratory context is nothing Sacks focuses on, but it is a context that is worth keeping in mind. Instead, Sacks focuses on the complexities that emerge upon closer reading which makes it impossible to understand them as narratives about right and wrong, good and bad, inside and outside. Maybe most important for the relation between Christians and Jews on the one side and Muslims on the other, Sacks presents the story of Isaac and Ismael as a story of reconciliation, in which God has not forsaken Ismael,³⁶ and Ismael and Isaac show up together at the funeral of Abraham,³⁷ which in my own Christian tradition rarely if ever is noted, let alone interpreted as a symbol of reconciliation. In all of the key stories Sacks detects God's inclusive love that has the last word: That Jacob is chosen, does not mean that Esau is forsaken,³⁸ and commenting on the story of Joseph and his brothers, Sacks emphasizes that God does not prove God's love by hating others.³⁹ The most important conclusion in Sacks' book builds on this non-exclusive reading of the stories of sibling rivalry in Genesis. Those are stories, Sacks maintains, which show that we all have a space in God's universe of justice and love.⁴⁰ For Sacks this conviction is rooted in the inclusivity of the Noah covenant which is valid for all of humanity and which is not in opposition to God's covenant with Israel at Sinai. Without going into the complexities of the relation between the covenant of Noah, the covenant of Sinai, the covenant in Jesus Christ, and then the covenant of

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 218.

Mohammed, from a Christian perspective I would like to conclude that there are important lessons to be learned here in terms of seeing believers from the other Abrahamic faiths not as competitors, but instead as siblings waiting to be reconciled. And the remarkable thing is: the tools to do it can be found right in our common narrative tradition. This is in tune with a Wesleyan understanding of universal love, but also with some of the key affirmations in the Lutheran document *The Church in the Public Space* which reminds us that God loves the world (not a specific community of faith) and never ceases to engage with it,⁴¹ which is why the church never is called to dominate the public space,⁴² but rather to share it with people of other faiths and convictions.⁴³ And I specifically want to highlight some additional affirmations in *The Church in the Public Space* which seem to me to be in tune with Jonathan Sacks' trajectory. We need a non-absolutistic understanding of Christian community to create the kind of "participatory public space" the document talks about, a space that fosters dialogue and cooperation.⁴⁴ Such dialogue is not in opposition to Christian witness, but it "deepens mutual understanding" and "constitutes a strong public witness".⁴⁵

I want to conclude with a reference to another non-Christian believer who has taught me important lessons regarding interreligious coexistence: the Muslim writer Navid Kermani. In his non-polarizing view of religions, he is a soul friend of his Jewish colleague Jonathan Sacks. He received the peace prize of the German book sellers in 2015 for his creative and profound writings about the possibilities of peaceful coexistence between religions. In a critical prophetic tone, he as a Muslim talked about a Christian monastery in Syria that had as its mission *to love Muslims*. Inspired by the leader of that monastery, father Jacques Mourad,

⁴¹ Cf. *The Church in the Public Space*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva 2017, p. 8.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 20, 23, 36.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 29.

he offered a very simple twofold rule for the encounter between Muslims and Christians. “Father Jacques defended the community he does not belong to and criticized his own.”⁴⁶ A resultant rule of conduct in the encounter with people from other faiths is *first*: Defend the representatives from other faiths against misrepresentation. Do not easily believe in the generalizing judgements of believers whose belief you do not share. Give them the benefit of the doubt, and above all: refrain from final judgements without having met a person of different faith or conviction. The *second* rule is: If you love your faith community, criticize it, in the same way as father Jacques criticized his Christian brothers and sisters for forgetting them in their struggle for peaceful coexistence in Syria. During his speech, Kermani added: “The love of one’s own – one’s own culture, one’s own country and also one’s own person – manifests itself in self-criticism.”⁴⁷

Here a profound non-polarizing view of interreligious relations emerges that has an aesthetic quality. And with that I want to return to the orchestra, or the choir for that matter, as a metaphor for the polyphony of religious tunes and voices. The encounter between believers from different faith traditions, after all, is as much about the *way* of encounter, its aesthetics, as it is about an exchange of *beliefs*. The musical metaphor, I suggest, can open our imagination for more peaceful and attentive engagements with people from other faith communities. One could summarize Navid Kermani’s two simple rules for the engagement of the religious other as a double listening process: first an attentive outward listening to the “tune” of the other religion, and then a critical inward listening to the “tune” of one’s own religion. In all three Abrahamic religions, music plays an important role for the transmission

⁴⁶ Navid Kermani, *Beyond the Borders – Jacques Mourad and Love in Syria*, Speech given at Paulskirche in Frankfurt October 18, 2015, p. 3-4. Cf. <http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/445651/?mid=1042759B> (April 28, 2018)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

of the message. Both the Torah and the Qur'an are supposed to be sung in order to become a living word in the ears and hearts of the believers, and music in Christianity has a similarly important function for the communication of the gospel not only into the heads but also into the hearts of the believers.

Navid Kermani has reflected extensively on the aesthetic dimension of Muslim mission from the very beginning. Whereas in the West it is a common prejudice that Islam was spread exclusively by means of violence, Kermani in his research shows that poetic and musical beauty played a key role in early Muslim conversion narratives. Oftentimes it was the beauty of the recited and sung Qur'an verses that overwhelmed people and made them convert.⁴⁸ According to a spread conviction in Islam, the Qur'an cannot be understood only by reading it. It has to be heard. So religious insight and enlightenment take the form of an acoustic experience of beauty. Therefore, the Qur'an is not the exact equivalent to the incarnation in Christianity, which is an often heard conviction: The Christians believe in Jesus Christ, the Muslims in the Qur'an. Instead the decisive point in Islam is what one could call the *audible* "inverbation", i.e. a poetic transformation into recited or sung words.⁴⁹ The Quranic scholar Angelika Neuwirth emphasizes a similar conviction when she writes: "The sung recitation of the Qur'an is like the resonance of the voice of God."⁵⁰ Indeed, I personally know the feeling of being aesthetically touched by the citation of the Qur'an, especially when it is not read but cited by heart, an art that has become exceedingly rare in Christianity. And I am challenged to rethink the role of music in my own tradition: Is there not something deeply touching and ensuring in the Christian message put to music? Does the transformation of the gospel into a

⁴⁸ Cf. Navid Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka. West-östliche Erkundungen*, München 2014, p. 25-6.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Angelika Neuwirth, *Ist der Koran vom Himmel gefallen?*, in: *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 1/2012, p. 11-17 (11). (My translation from the German)

musical message not communicate something of what Paul means when he says that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6)?

Now, Kermani is not unaware of the problematic side of Arabic aesthetics, and he points out that many Muslims experience exactly the beauty of the Arabic as a problem. It makes it also susceptible for ideological misuse,⁵¹ which happens in the case of Islamist populists.⁵²

Finally, Kermani highlights an aspect of a responsible study of the Qur'an, which is of utmost importance for interreligious relations. He distances himself from fundamentalist exegesis which ignores the plurality of interpretations of the sources. Instead he commits himself to an exegesis of the Qur'an that insists on the plurality of meanings of any given text and thereby preserves "the Qur'an's poetic quality and its poetically structured language". The ambiguity and the plurality of meaning are central here. The Qur'an, Kermani maintains, "ceases to be poetic once it becomes unambiguous".⁵³ Its beauty is intimately connected to the plurality of its meanings. And if that is so, there cannot be any monopoly of interpretation. Exactly that can be affirmed about the Bible from a Protestant Christian perspective: No one, neither a person or an institution, can claim to have access to the final and authoritative interpretation of the Bible. Only together can we understand holy scripture in its deeper significance, and at times we will be inspired in the encounter with Jews and Muslims to gain an even deeper understanding of our own holy scriptures.

In my comments on Sacks and Kerman I have tried to describe some pearls I have glimpsed after reading texts of representatives from other Abrahamic faiths. At least two lessons I take away for my understanding of my own Christian faith after reading Kermani:

⁵¹ Cf. Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 38.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 40f.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 42. (My translation from the German)

First, it is important to remain attentive to the ambivalences and shadow sides of my own faith tradition and to rethink them critically. *Second*, I was challenged to refocus on the beauty, the poetic quality of my own holy texts. The emphasis on beauty, not least audible beauty, inspires me to rethink the significance of the fact that also in my tradition the truth of faith is communicated in poetic and musical ways: in the Psalms, in the Proverbs, in the Song of Songs, in Ecclesiastes, but also in many passages of the New Testament. A religious truth that is expressed in amazement, in extasy, in a finely balanced rhythm and maybe even in the form of music, is ill fitted to be used in a competition against another truth. But is it less true only because it is not pitched against another truth in opposition? If the poetic and musical passages in the Bible have anything to do with a Christian claim to truth – and I am convinced that that is the case – than it is a claim to a truth that cannot be separated from an existential sense of being touched as a whole being. For sure, Christian truth cannot be expressed without reference to propositional language, but it certainly is not exhausted in these propositions. It starts so to speak as vibrations in the lives of people, and this is the reason why the boundaries between religions cannot be understood as strict division lines. There is an existential connection between believers from different religions who have a sense for the aesthetic, the musical quality of faith.

This existential connection between people who let themselves be grasped in a holistic way by the message of their religious tradition is, by the way, something that can be witnessed in one of the key texts of early Methodism. John Wesley wrote *The Character of a Methodist* in 1742, and there he criticizes an understanding of Christian faith that too much builds on opinions, formulations or deeds. Such an *outward* Christianity is so alien to Wesley that he exclaims in the middle of the text: Were these outward signs “the mark of a Methodist, I would

sooner choose to be a sincere Jew, Turk, or Pagan.”⁵⁴ In Wesley’s England “Turk” was a common term for Muslims (which is ethnically quite reductionistic, of course). What to me is remarkable in this Wesleyan exclamation is the implicit understanding of Christian truth as lived truth. A merely propositional understanding of Christian truth to Wesley is less desirable than a wholeheartedly embraced Jewish or Muslim truth. He therefore seems to feel closer to sincere believers from other religions than to Christians whose Christianity exhausts itself in formalities or what he used to call “the form of religion”.

A Choir of Religions?

As proposed in the beginning, I end with what could be understood as an eschatological (and maybe even utopian) imagination of the coexistence between the Abrahamic religions from a Christian perspective: If the claim to truth in the Christian tradition ultimately is inseparable from the lived witness of Christians, i.e. its ethical dimension, the imagination of the relation between the Abrahamic religions as a community of music, of communal vibration, may be helpful for the challenge of concrete coexistence. For all its limitations, it has the potential to inspire peaceful coexistence between religions without abandoning their uniqueness, to live difference without domination, as Edward W. Said proposes in the conversation with Daniel Barenboim mentioned in the beginning of this article.

Making music or singing in a choir can be understood as an exercise of such difference without domination and it can become a metaphor for concrete constructive encounters between people from the Abrahamic religions who in their own respective traditions have

⁵⁴ The Character of a Methodist (1742), 4. In: <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/The-Character-of-a-Methodist> (August 15, 2018)

musical resources that serve the existential deepening of the experience and commitment of believers. To be touched by the aesthetically beautiful recitation of the Qur'an does not mean that I as a Christian have to learn the art of Qur'an recitation. But it can inspire me to reevaluate the significance of music and singing in my own faith tradition. It inspires me to trust anew the vibrancy of the biblical message and to practice with new joy and expectation for example the singing of Psalms. It inspires me not least to recognize anew that the Bible is not simply a book with texts, but a living tradition that needs to become a living tune over and over again. To remain within the metaphor of sound: I want that my entire life becomes a resonance of God's voice as I encounter it in the biblical message. But – and this is maybe the main point of this article – this does not mean that this resonance is evoked in strict opposition or even hostility to Islam.⁵⁵

My imagination for the coexistence of religions is influenced by the example of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. I want to understand the interrelation between the Abrahamic religions like the polyphony of a choir, which has a lot of resemblances with an orchestra. This is about more than tolerance. It is about an attentive mutual listening process. After all, every voice tune contributes to the particular sound of the choir, and each voice sings its own melody in the most beautiful way only if it simultaneously listens to the other voices of the choir. The attention to other religious voices helps us to widen our horizon, but not least also to deepen the understanding of our own religious message. This means that I am actually dependent on Jewish and Muslim voices for the deepening of my own identity and vice versa.

⁵⁵ Cf. the heated discussion in Sweden whether or not Muslims should be allowed to have a prayer call from minarets in the same way as churches are ringing their bells to call to worship. – cf. among many other examples an article on the debate in the city of Växjö in southern Sweden in *Dagens Nyheter* May 8, 2018: <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/klartecken-for-boneutrop-i-vaxjo/> (August 15, 2018)

Only together can these voices make the choir of religions come alive and contribute to each other's maturing.

In our current public situation in the West and elsewhere there is a dire need to resist a polarizing view of the relation between religions. Sacks and Kermani are leading the way, and as representatives from the two other great Abrahamic religions they can inspire Christian leaders, intellectuals, and practitioners to refrain from polarizing or even hostile talk about their religious siblings. And maybe the way into the future is less a way of *rational argument* for or against and more a way of *aesthetic inspiration* that cannot occur in separation from each other. If the Abrahamic religions in times of migration increasingly dwell in the same spaces, the way forward needs to be one of mutual listening. To understand the life of different faith communities as voices in the same choir opens up for an understanding of belonging without separation and an affirmation of difference without domination.