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Experiences of Inter-religious Dialogue as a German Hindu Woman

I am writing this article from the perspective of a German woman who grew up in a Christian church context and has been initiated into Hinduism for 27 years. However, I am neither a theologian nor an Indologist and have only studied comparative religion for a few semesters. As a social educationalist now writing a thesis on “Pro-sociality in Hinduism”¹, and also as the director of the Hindu charitable organisation “Food for Life”², I am nevertheless not simply an ordinary run-of-the-mill woman. On the contrary, precisely as an academic and a practising Hindu, I have been in demand over the past 15 years from church bodies with increasing frequency and have presented Hinduism in many different dialogue situations; this has been the case despite many years of commitment to ISKCON³, a movement of Vaishnava Hinduism which is still described as a “sect” in church documents.⁴ Against the background of these experiences, I should therefore like to describe my experiences of inter-religious dialogue in what follows.

In this dialogue, what I usually encounter first is the basic question of how “you” can be a Hindu as a German. Many orthodox Hindus from India would claim that it is not possible at all to “convert” to Hinduism without having been brought up as a Hindu. And for many Western people whom I meet, this process is a contradiction in itself: how is it possible to switch from such a

¹ Dissertation at the University of Cologne under Prof. Hansjosef Buchkremer. Subject: *Pro-sociality in Hinduism – the ideal and the reality*.

² Food for Life Deutschland e.V. was established officially in Germany in 1994 and has since been directed and administered by Alice Schumann.

³ ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), founded in 1970 by an Indian, A.C. De Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who came to the West in 1969. It is a further development of the Vishnuitic Bhakti (loving devotion to God) movement, Brahma Madhva Gandija – discipleship of followers – which is linked with the Holy Reformer Chaitanya (1486-1533) – also known popularly in Germany as the “Hare Krishna” movement.

⁴ e.g. IDEA-Spektrum No.4, 28 January 2001, p.18. (Source: Ev. Zentrale für Weltanschauungsfragen) Idea e.V., Evangelical News Agency.

liberal, Christian, democratic society to that discriminatory, caste-ridden, Hindu religion and to do so as a woman who seemed to be keen on “emancipation” even in their youth?

In view of this fundamental questioning, the subject of this book on feminist approaches to inter-religious dialogue initially put me on the defensive. My spontaneous answer was that I am not a feminist and I understood the invitation as a request once again to give an account of the position of women in Hinduism. In such a situation where I have to defend Hinduism I should like to begin with the following quotation from Walter Kerber:

“In (inter-religious) debates of that kind, there is a widespread false assumption that one can compare the ideal picture of one’s own religion or worldview with the reality in other religions and worldviews which leads one to conclude: we are obviously better than all the others. One can avoid this ethnocentric prejudice by comparing reality with reality and the ideal with the ideal.”⁵

The distinction between the ideal and the reality of each religion seems to me to be of fundamental importance. With regard to Hinduism, I should like to take account of both components in my contribution: the philosophical religious ideal as it is presented in the “holy” scriptures of Hinduism and the reality of Hinduism determined by socialisation and tradition as it appears to me as a woman. Although my description is certainly based on biographical experiences and less on objective facts and observations, this is not merely because I can only approach the subject in this subjective way as a result of my own socialisation, my own character and my own psyche; I believe, in addition, that witness to one’s personal experiences and conclusions is the most important basis for a genuine dialogue.

Since I have been asked about my experiences as a German Hindu woman, I shall therefore also respond as a woman for whom – almost in contradiction to her spontaneous rejection of the concept of feminism – the question of reconciling her spiritual path with her sense of emancipation has always remained an issue, even though she has given it low priority at certain times. For me, this has been evident above all in intra-religious disputes within the Hindu community in which I have been active for longest in Germany and in which the question of power and leadership by men and women arose and had to be resolved increasingly. Parallel to these intra-religious processes, I have then been in demand in

⁵ Walter Kerber (ed.), *Religion und prosoziales Verhalten (Religion and pro-social behaviour)*; Kindt Verlag: Munich 1995), 121.

inter-religious dialogue precisely as a woman. Hence the questions of feminist theology, with which I have been confronted by the editors of this annual review, have always played an important part in my conscientisation process.

This initial reflection has already touched on the way that dialogue takes place on three levels which I should now like to discuss in greater detail:

1. *Inner-religious dialogue*, i.e. my personal quest for self-fulfilment and the dialogue within myself as well as the quest for God and dialogue with God;
2. *Intra-religious dialogue*, i.e. my real perceptions and practical experiences within the Hindu groups that I have encountered in the course of my quest;
3. *Inter-religious dialogue*, i.e. the encounters that I as a Hindu woman have had within my “native”, traditionally Christian society and the interchange with “people of other faiths” in religious organisations and at inter-religious conferences.

When going on to reflect on my experiences at these three levels, I shall particularly concentrate on the feminist theme of this book while paying less attention to other important issues of Hinduism which I consider equally relevant for religion and philosophy.

The inner-religious dialogue

To start by reflecting on inner-religious dialogue as the first level of dialogue, I should like to describe my own search for self-fulfilment which was geared, on the one hand, to a specific *ideal* and how, on the other hand, it took shape within a particular *reality*, namely that of my German and originally Christian socialisation. It also seems to me that a personal quest for self-fulfilment in the form of an inner dialogue – not only with myself but with God – is the basic requirement both for my own process of conscientisation and for every additional dialogue with other people.

As the granddaughter of an “apostate” Lutheran missionary⁶ and the daughter of an “apostate” Catholic doctor, who resolved to leave the Roman Catholic

⁶ Friedrich Schroeder, *Aus dem Leben eines Abtrünnigen oder vom Orthodoxismus zum Liberalismus (About the Life of an Apostate or From Orthodoxy to Liberalism)*; A. Martini & Grütetien GmbH: Elberfeld 1912). Schroeder was sent out as a young, new missionary of the Rhenish Missionary Society to Gibeon, South West Africa, and served there from 1886 to 1899.

Church following the prohibition of the pill⁷ by Pope Paul VI, I was exposed early in life to the ambiguities of the Christian churches. This was all the more so when – in my constant search for the meaning of life and an answer about what happens after death – I “bombarded” the teacher of religious studies with questions and unfortunately received no answers that satisfied me. In this situation, I came across a book of yoga exercises that my mother had and I discovered my father’s copy of Hermann Hesse’s “Siddharta”; in this way my path to Hinduism was really marked out naturally “from the cradle”. But what I was looking for was not an “India trip” or a “Guru trend”. Although I was engaged in an intense quest, I had no wish to associate myself with the “Bhagwan movement” (later “Osho”) that was spreading at that time, despite the fact that a number of my acquaintances were drawn to it in those days. I had no desire to dress in red, nor did I find the answers of the “Bhagwan followers” to my philosophical questions satisfying. “Just ask Bhagwan!” That answer was not enough for me.

During the following period I then came across the TM practice of *Maharishi Yogi*.⁸ After hesitating for quite some time, I asked the local TM teacher to give me a “mantra” for which I had to pay. Although meditation with the mantra gave me strength, I had problems about the role of the “teacher” who gave me strict instructions about how long I should meditate each day. Nevertheless, I wondered where the strong energy came from that I sensed during the meditation. It was not that the meditation was like a drug; it was something other-worldly or transcendental. In my innermost heart I had not forgotten my quest for the “cause of all causes” or the search for God. But there was never any talk about “God”, only about self-fulfilment and self-perfection. Later I learnt that this was more a matter of the non-personality path (monism) within Hinduism. However, that was not what I had been looking for. I had always sought, conceived of and seen God as a person. Perhaps this was an effect of my Christian upbringing because, even as a child, I had always prayed to God and tried to have a dialogue with God. For me, even today God is still the same God as always. Precisely because I cannot speak with “nothingness”, I have never been interested in Buddhism, which was described to me in religious instruction as the “doctrine of nothingness”, despite its popularity here in the West. Today I know that Hinduism embraces all the different approaches

⁷ Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (in: Acta Apostolicae Sedis 60, 481-503) of 25.07.1968.

⁸ TM = transcendental meditation.

– polytheism, monotheism and monism – which in some way complement each other. So through TM I had only experienced the force of divine radiation. The unquestionably positive yoga technique of deep meditation helped me to balance out my deficits of order, discipline, purity, concentration of the mind and correct behaviour in society. But I felt the lack of a dialogue with and about God. Especially at the weekend seminars, it struck me that each of the participants was interested only in their personal progress and less in inter-personal relationships.

In addition, my teacher did not consider it his task to answer my philosophical questions. So the following questions remained open for me: why should a mantra like this cost anything? Why is it secret? Why must I observe strict time limits for meditation (no more than 20 minutes morning and evening)? Where does God fit into this path? Where is there any interchange or dialogue? What makes up the role of the teacher?

Despite receiving instructions to the contrary, I experimented by engaging in unlimited meditation several times. And in this way I experienced a “vision”, the memory of which is deeply imprinted on my consciousness even today. A little bit ahead of me I saw a figure meditating. For me, it was clear that this must be “God”. It was only later, referring to descriptions in ancient Hindu scriptures, that it became clear to me that it had been an incarnation of Vishnu. Other people may claim that I could have imagined it, but for me this was an experience of a “knowledge of God” or “vision”. For the time being I pursued this no further. I had come upon something, something permanent and authentic, the cause of everything. And it was something quite personal that no one could take away from me. I could also continue happily to pray to the same God as before; for me, God had remained unchanged. After that, I did in fact abandon the contact with TM but continued with the meditation technique for myself personally.

Years later, when I had long since settled into a quite normal student life in Berlin and spirituality appeared to play no more part at all in my context, through an old acquaintance I came across another Hindu movement which practices the way of Bhakti yoga. In the days that followed I discussed philosophical issues, vegetarianism, reincarnation, karma, etc. with my acquaintance. Although I had difficulties about his rigorous sense of mission, I felt that his inner conviction was genuine and his philosophical arguments were unbeatable. He initiated me into the chanting of the “Hare Krishna mantra”. That is a meditation based on sound and speech which was unfamiliar to me at first because, on the one hand, it is meditation but, on the other, also

prayer, i.e. dialogue with God. Very soon I had the inner sense that this way was authentic and right – and my way. From that time onwards, I stopped eating meat, fish or eggs, drank no alcohol or coffee and devoted myself enthusiastically to studying the Vedas. These have been translated in detail from Sanskrit into English by *Swami Prabhupada*, the founder of this Hindu organisation.⁹ Although the descriptions in these ancient scriptures explained my divine vision, it struck me already at that time that the androcentricity in the author's commentary and his ideal image of women did not fit the philosophy as I had understood it and were certainly inappropriate in a German society. He described women in certain passages as less intelligent or compared them with children. But the predominant, spiritual force and authenticity of these writings led me to take these passages lightly. Indeed, in general I found many satisfactory answers to my questions about reincarnation, karma and meditation. This and the intense spiritual atmosphere as a result of jointly practising Bhakti yoga (yoga of loving devotion to God) produced a special strength and also an exaltation to a spiritual, transcendent level.

So my personal quest for self-fulfilment and the dialogue with myself and with God finally led to my being able to identify with this form of Bhakti yoga. I accordingly had myself initiated and attempted as a *brahmacarini* (nun) to do "mission" for Hinduism in this society with its Christian background.

The intra-religious dialogue

I should now like to go on to describe how my practical search for fulfilment within the Hindu community increasingly gave rise to intra-religious dialogue in the course of time and how this finally led me to an awareness of the necessary inculturation and reform of this Hindu community in Germany.

The community and the give-and-take within the organisation were essential for me really to enter deeply into the spiritual practice. But precisely my experiences in the spiritual community made me more aware of issues which had appeared secondary to me at the beginning of my quest. Although I had already been disturbed about paying for the mantra and sticking to rigid regulations about prayer, what struck me more and more in the ISKCON was the

⁹ Abay Caran De Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), also known as Shрила Prabhupada. Founder of ISKCON and of the publishers Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT); author of 80 books including numerous translations of ancient Indian and Vedantic documents.

allocation of roles according to gender combined with the automatic assumption of the predominance of the men. In fact, I had already felt very ambiguous about my first visits to the temples in the early 1980s. On the one side, the atmosphere radiated an authentic, pure spirituality even more strongly than the books described, and the people seemed to be very satisfied and treated me in a very friendly and personal way; but, on the other, the Indian dress made a strange impression in most cases. The shaven heads of the men and the women's heads covered by saris looked to me like something which did not fit the philosophy at all as I had understood it.

Indeed, according to the philosophy and religion of Hinduism, it is only the embodied souls which are subject to the duality of the sexes; the soul itself is spiritual by nature and thus transcends these temporary dualities. On the spiritual level, only God is male (here as Krishna) and the souls are female. And even in this male form Krishna always appears with his female partner Radha; the two are one as a divine couple. Moreover, in addition to numerous goddesses, Hinduism also has many female saints.

However, as time went on I observed – as far as discrimination against women was concerned – that neither the social reality of Hindu India nor that of the temples in Germany corresponded to this philosophical ideal. I began to realise that the strong emphasis on different gender roles and positions in the reality of the temples was out-of-date for Western society. At that time, the women always sat and stood behind the men and only received their food after the men. At the joint devotional ceremonies, the men did the chanting and the readings were done exclusively by men. All the Gurus were men as well.¹⁰ This androcentricity which often caused readings to degenerate into deprecation of women went against my grain. Because in my female body I sometimes had the feeling it would be better to make myself invisible when encountering men. It was extremely strange and unpleasant for me that men were trained not to look at women when talking to them.

I later learnt that this training did not really have anything to do with women as such, but that an attraction to the other sex was considered an obstacle for one's spiritual life. It is not without reason that there are ashrams for men or for women as well as monasteries and nunneries. I also learnt that women had to cover their hair in all religions so that men will not be distracted from their

¹⁰ Guru in Sanskrit means "heavy weight" so Gurus are those who are heavily laden with wisdom or "wise" teachers.

religious path or confused by sexual desires. So the Bhagavad Gita states in one verse that desire is the greatest enemy on the way to self-realisation.¹¹ I have some doubt as to whether these measures really help and whether women are more protected in this way. But it was quite clear to me that, as “objects of desire”, they were negated, discriminated and seen as evil in themselves. According to my experiences in an ashram and also in inter-religious dialogue, sexual restraint was considerably more difficult for men than for women. And, in fact, women as such as are by no means as “desiring” as men may imagine them to be. However, because of this indoctrinated conception, women minimise themselves and are in danger of losing their self-respect. In a social setting, this tends to be at the back of people’s minds.

I found myself facing a growing dilemma in my Hindu community. On the one hand, I knew that Bhakti yoga was the way for me but, on the other, this clear distinction between the roles of the different sexes bothered me. For this reason, I was also only able initially to bear temple life for a short time and took refuge in the kitchen instead of participating in the novices’ programme (mantra meditation, veneration of deities¹² and reading) which was very much geared to the men. The woman cook, a long term pupil of the founder, enabled me to observe devoted service to God in practice and I also learnt Indian cooking. I sensed that this kind of “Bhakti yoga” was my religious path. And, in spite of all my criticism of the discrimination, I recognised the spiritual force and devotion to God which radiated from this path and also from the people who followed it.

Equally as important as my experiences with the cook in this connection was the fact that I undertook several pilgrimages to India during my years as a “Brahmacarini”. In contrast to Germany, there I felt very much at ease in a sari. And I was never bothered by Indian men. Whether I covered my head or not made no difference. From this I concluded that men in India pay more attention to their duty to control their senses themselves instead of making this an exaggerated burden for the women by avoiding them, disguising them or declaring them the sex with greater desires. Moreover, in the Indian temples and for the distribution of meals, the women more frequently stood at the front rather than the back. And in my daily dealings with “renouncers” (monks) I was naturally respected and never experienced their not looking at me when

¹¹ BG 3.37ff.

¹² Deity means a figure or an image of God.

they were speaking to me. On the contrary, they addressed me as “mataji” (mother) as a sign of respect. The background to this is the advice from the scriptures that men should consider all women – except their own wives – as mothers.¹³ I in no way wish to minimise the many forms of discrimination against women in India which also contradict the Hindu ideal, but am only referring here to the difference in relation to morality as I experienced it in daily life. In some way, this confirmed the critical view I mentioned before of the unpleasant and unnatural contact with men in the German temples. It was only during my later studies that I learnt that the poetry of the Bhakti tradition was written in the 15th century almost exclusively by Indian women of the lower castes. The most famous woman poet even today is Mirabai.¹⁴ Just as Buddhism provided a way out of the rigidity of the caste society, the Bhakti movement offered women an escape from their position of discrimination within this system.¹⁵

I then found my first way out of the dilemma of roles being assigned according to gender in what is known as “Sankirtana” (singing together) that was described by the founder of ISKCON as a form of mission on the street. This meant that we travelled in groups of three or four women from one town to another and tried to offer translations from the Vedas to people on the street. The positive side-effect connected with the intra-religious approach was that I developed a respect for women which I had lost to a large extent because of their acceptance or toleration of being discriminated in their role in the temple community but also because of the competitive philosophy which is current in our society. On our missionary journeys it was no longer important whether you were a woman or a man. This situation is reinforced by the philosophy of reincarnation, i.e. that our bodies are temporal while our souls are eternal and spiritual. Moreover, at that time missionary service was the most respected position for women. This meant I enjoyed special appreciation so that I no longer felt my female body to be an obstacle in this community.

¹³ Manusamhita, Chap. 4 and 6.

¹⁴ Mirabai (about 1498-1546), Indian mystic and poet. Her quite personal ecstatic love and lament songs have remained alive throughout the centuries and are still famous in India among Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Muslims. There are many books and CDs with these songs. Her life has been filmed on many occasions and her verses form part of world literature alongside the poet-mystics Hafis, Rumi, Kabir and Hildegard von Bingen.

¹⁵ cf. Sarah Hughes, *Women in World History* (M. E. Sharpe: New York 1997), 54; cf. also: Alice Schumann, “Wege und Umwege zur Bhakti” (“Ways direct and indirect to Bhakti”), in: *RIG (Religionen im Gespräch)* 8, Nachrodt 2004, 114-122.

After that, living together in the temple for a time made sense to me again. Although the way was my personal one and I had always refused close followers, the community with like-minded people was important because, on my own, I should never have found the strength and courage to follow this path so consistently here in the Western society which is so materialistic. But, unfortunately, with regard to gender nothing had changed in the temples. All the responsible positions such as gurus, swamis or temple directors were occupied by men. And even the National Council was a purely male gathering. I continued to be dissatisfied about the contrast between our active missionary work and the *ideal image* of a Hindu woman who is chaste, subservient to her husband, devoted and reticent.

As a result of a historical development, I then found a second way out of the dilemma of the roles assigned to me as a woman. When the frontiers with the GDR opened up, this coincided with my need to combine my missionary activities with more responsibility and to pursue my organisational inclinations. An enormous number of books were distributed in the East after the wall came down which led us to conclude that a centre was needed there as well. Since, at that time, no male members were able or wanted to undertake this responsibility, I was allowed to attempt to open a centre there. So I set out alone, equipped only with a bag and a small car, for Weimar, found a place to rent and – initially on my own – organised weekly programmes with cooking, music and introductory lectures. It soon became clear that the East German interest was purely in buying cheap literature which had previously been prohibited. As a result of their “Socialist socialisation”, the people were almost exclusively atheists who, for the time being, did not want to hear anything about doctrines of whatever kind. But the advantage was that the women there exercised their rights quite naturally. It was unknown for them that women should need to fight for their rights like in the West. This suited me very well because I did not need to introduce any “reforms” for women and so made no distinction between men and women from the very beginning. The repeated criticism about my bad “standard” in the temple, voiced by male “authorities” from the West who visited the centre to give lectures, was something I put up with. It was more important to me to protect the women from discrimination.

At the same time, two women had taken over the running of temples in West Germany as well which meant the National Council could no longer avoid also admitting women. That was where the difficult but worthwhile reforms in the intra-religious realm finally began. We were granted the right to vote. With some other strong women, we also set up a National Women’s

Council. And bit by bit we demanded more rights for the women. In the centres run by women, and later in other centres as well, the women no longer stood behind but beside the men. They also gave lectures and became cantors during the programmes. However, many men including swamis and gurus found it hard to accept the new reforms. In this situation, I observed that Western men, who had converted to Hinduism, had problems especially about having to share their positions with women, whereas their Indian counterparts tended more to have difficulties about giving up long established roles and traditions. But there were also women who did not want to support these reforms for fear of getting a bad reputation as “heavy women”, as they started calling us, and for this reason not finding a husband. Nevertheless, they also benefitted (silently) from our reforms.

My life was now full of dialogue. My “inner-religious dialogue” with God, in the form of God’s name which is not different from God, took place during my morning meditation, during the day and by praying before the deities. The “intra-religious dialogue” took place in singing together, philosophising and discussing with like-minded people – the women missionaries and temple dwellers. And the “inter-religious dialogue” with Christians, followers of other religions and so-called atheists took place for me initially on the street and then also in my own centre.

Inter-religious dialogue

My inter-religious dialogue really started with my missionary activities. In the process, I met more than a hundred people each day, spoke to them, communicated with them, gave them books and proclaimed and defended my religion and philosophy. It was only recently that I became aware that, through my activities as a Hindu missionary on the streets of Germany, I had basically been following in the footsteps of my grandfather who, after his work as a Christian missionary in South West Africa, had also been a missionary in Cologne.¹⁶ If this activity had not become so discredited today, because our main religions, the churches in Germany, no longer need this kind of mission owing to the established church tax system, an inter-religious dialogue on the horizontal level – rather than on the verticle level as a present – would be much more natural.

What I learnt from the encounters and dialogue with people on the street, to whom this approach was totally foreign and who were sometimes friendly,

¹⁶ cf. Schroeder, *Aus dem Leben eines Abtrünnigen*, 63ff.

sometimes unfriendly and occasionally even aggressive, was humility, tolerance and taking firm refuge in God. It was a success each time someone took a book away with them, especially the Bhagavad Gita.¹⁷ I saw myself in the process merely as the deliverer of a spiritual treasure. What the person in question then did with the book was not my business. Despite the limitations, deprivations, discipline and sometimes an inner struggle with myself, this uncompromising, full-time spiritual life gave me a joy, a happiness, a religious conviction and, at the same time, a freedom such as I had never known or experienced before. Naturally, I also wanted to share this happiness with everyone and that included my family and my friends. With this stronger sense of a missionary calling, I unfortunately frequently lacked diplomacy. But at least I managed to convince my mother and sister to become vegetarians.

However, it was not easy week after week, month after month and year after year to keep this joy going in Germany with its Christian and atheistic towns. Because, despite all its virtues, spirituality and mission, ISKCON was considered a sect. One reason for this was that the church had introduced the newly established profession of “commissioner for sects” who devoted themselves energetically to discrediting all the groups and movements outside of the church and also did so through the media. But among the followers of my Hindu movement there was also a feeling of superiority over people who thought differently which sometimes made it impossible to exchange ideas on an equal footing.

After the street mission, the time in East Germany was for me also the end of a closed group existence, because merely distributing books and then moving on to the next person required no lengthy discussions with people of different views. What mattered in Weimar was to continue to live with the local people in a cooperative way. So I became more involved in the dialogue with the media and with the local church representatives. In this context, it was not appropriate to preach or do mission, nor to defend oneself; it required a friendly exchange of opinions which then developed into a fruitful inter-religious dialogue. However, then the commissioners for sects from the West started their “mission” in the media. Suddenly, numerous reports on us were published in the local daily papers. The worst and most decisive article appeared in Weimar’s largest daily paper. It was an enormous article with photos of our centre under the heading, “When the ego is on the edge of an abyss”. After that, the dialogue was broken off and our neighbours who had previously

¹⁷ The Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Highest”), also known as the “Hindu Bible”, sets out the philosophical essence of the Vedic writings and was Gandhi’s favourite reading matter.

been kindly disposed, as well as the local population, turned against us. Even the food distribution project, which I had built up for local needy people, got a bad name.

We became some kind of “outlaws” for many East Germans who had preserved some sort of nationalistic, racist thinking subconsciously under the Socialist regime, and this then was expressed in public in the form of skinheads. And then, when some new members came to Weimar from the West and from other eastern countries, because the organisation had always been international anyway, we were subjected to innumerable attacks on our cars, the new centre and even physically. Once I myself was the victim of such an attack when a skinhead tried to stab me one evening in a telephone box with an enormous knife. The people living nearby just observed this in silence from behind their curtains. During this period of threats and discrimination by the local people (despite the former concentration camp, Buchenwald, being only 10 km away), I could sometimes well imagine how a Jew must have felt during the Third Reich. In the context of this continuing background of threats, I finally returned to the West after four years.

That was the end of my organisational task and my “position” as a temple director. But I soon received a new and much more influential “position” through the inter-religious dialogue, and that was also, in a sense, my third step out of my dilemma as a German Hindu woman. The numerous challenges and experiences I had had in my encounters with people of other convictions while on mission and with the East German population had stimulated an urge in me to become more actively involved in inter-religious dialogue. Indeed, only by means of direct communication with representatives of politics and other religions was there a chance to enable others to understand, respect and accept my religion and philosophy in a comprehensible way. And so this area became my main task in addition to managing Food for Life Deutschland e.V. I attended inter-religious seminars and events, organised inter-religious conferences myself and had in the meantime become the public relations woman and later the chairwoman of the organisation in Germany as well. I also established contact with the people behind the inflammatory propaganda, with the commissioners for sects, with representatives of politics and the media and I set up a “Communication Team”.

The inter-religious debate was and still is of mutual benefit today: church institutions like to “flaunt” the merit of also seeing Hinduism represented at their inter-religious meetings, and I myself have gained acceptance and recognition in academic circles. As a result of my presence, I have been able to counteract numerous hair-raising clichés about Hinduism with which I have

been confronted among “educated” church representatives and followers of other religions. For example, on one occasion, a Protestant mission director claimed that the Hindus needed Jesus because they otherwise had no possibility of breaking out of the circle of birth and death. And the reverse was also true: thanks to the inter-religious exchange of views, I had my own long-standing clichés about Islam corrected e.g. by Muslim women representatives.¹⁸

For the dialogue, the discussions with ISKCON representatives from England was also helpful. Because of its different colonial history and the many Hindus who live in England, the organisation enjoys the same acceptance there as the other religious communities. Its followers started early on describing themselves explicitly as “representatives of Hinduism” – and not as representatives of a “new religious movement” (or even a “sect” as in Germany). They also deliberately joined up with the Indian Hindus and formed a “Hindu Council”. This enabled them to engage in activities in educational institutions as well and they were able to be employed by schools and universities. In the meantime, representatives of this organisation have become lecturers at various universities and have founded the “Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies”¹⁹; in the near future, a state university will also be established under its leadership. It seems to me that it is only on this level of mutual acceptance that partners in inter-religious dialogue can really meet eye to eye, and not when one claims that the other belongs to a “sect” or to something that is not a “true” religion.

But in Germany the conditions were quite different. Indeed, in 1997 under pressure from the churches, the German Bundestag (parliament) appointed a commission of enquiry with the title “So-called sects and psycho-groups”. As the commissioner for dialogue, I established close contact at that time with the experts (psychologists, sociologists and commissioners for sects) and the members of parliament on this commission and put forward the view internally that ISKCON should be more open to society and admit the past errors of the organisation. In order to create transparency, it was also possible to convince the conservative authorities of our organisation that reforms were necessary and to overcome the social deficits which still existed. After all, one cannot simply claim that liberality or openness constitute reforms without being liberal

¹⁸ E.g. Women on the staff of ZIF (Zentrum islamischer Frauenforschung – Centre for Islamic women’s research, Cologne).

¹⁹ The University of Wales, Lampeter, provides a course entitled “Vaishnava Theology” in cooperation with ISKCON; the teaching takes place at the “Bhaktivedanta College”, an institution belonging to the organisation in the Ardennes in Belgium.

and introducing reforms in one's own ranks. Since in the meantime, as a result of the inter-religious dialogue, some well-intentioned contacts had been established with representatives of the Protestant and Catholic churches and with other academics, and these had been helpful for this "inquiry"²⁰, the experts also recognised the deeper significance and serious spirituality and philosophy of the organisation and its Hindu authenticity. The result of the commission of inquiry was that the organisation was not a "sect".²¹ Thanks to this outcome we were able to counteract many prejudices as well and finally the public was also compelled to listen to us and not simply to write us off. Nevertheless, there are still certain individuals or institutions which continue to try to ignore the result even today.

It was then possible for me myself to adopt a quite different stand in the inter-religious context; I felt I had been authorised to be a representative of Hinduism. My contacts in the inter-religious dialogue led to my being invited with increasing frequency to provide information in schools about ISKCON, on the one hand, and, on the other, to give lectures and presentations about Hinduism in general in secondary schools, academies and universities. In order to be on the same academic level in inter-religious dialogue, i.e. to be able to pass on my knowledge of Hinduism in a well-founded way, I started to study comparative religion. I also studied over two years for my diploma as a social educationalist in order to be qualified as director of the charitable association Food for Life.

In my dissertation, I am trying to use my studies and experiences to uncover the ethics in the ideal and the reality of Hinduism and to point to possibilities for counteracting discrimination on the basis of Hindu ethics.

Conclusion

The exchanges I have had with people in inter-religious dialogue have led me to the following conclusions:

- Inter-religious dialogue is only possible if the partners in the dialogue are consciously on the same level (this applies both to men and women).

²⁰ *Inter alia* EZW (ev. Zentrale für Weltanschauungsfragen, Berlin), Refidi (Referat für Interreligiösen Dialog, Cologne); membership of INTRA^o (Interreligiöser Arbeitskreis, Iserlohn), RfP (Religions for Peace, Cologne-Bonn), DIG (Deutsch-Indische Gesellschaft, Frankfurt).

²¹ Cf. Final report of the Commission of Inquiry of the German parliament "Sogenannte Sekten und Psychogruppen", 1998, 169f; cf. also Interview with Alice Schumann in "Special Report", an appendix to this report.

- In order to reach the same level, any sense or form of mission is inappropriate and an obstacle to inter-religious dialogue.
- No inter-religious dialogue is possible without tolerance and respect for other confessions of faith.
- Inter-religious dialogue is possible only if one can stand up for one's own convictions.
- If I am unable to stand up for my religious community in its ideal and/or real form, I must firstly become aware of my own points of criticism and then also state them frankly.
- In the process, there should be no fear about possibly also changing one's religion. Even though the representatives of certain religions see this as a danger in inter-religious dialogue and call for clear lines of distinction, it also constitutes an opportunity.²²
- Through inter-religious dialogue the problem e.g. of discrimination against women becomes more or less visible in all religions and societies. This implies that no one can point a finger at the others; "people who live in glass houses should not throw stones."
- Through inter-religious dialogue, the female partners become aware of existing discrimination and are able to state and change things in their own community through mutual support and solidarity.
- As a result of inner-religious, intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue, one of my essential benefits is the recognition that knowledge is the only means of counteracting discrimination (including one's own).

Om tat sat

Translation from the German: Margaret A. Pater

Dieser Artikel greift mehrere Thematiken auf: Zunächst wird die innere Entwicklung einer im deutsch-christlichen Kontext aufgewachsenen Frau, die sich einer völlig „fremden“ Religion, dem Hinduismus, anschließt, aus ihrer eigenen Sicht beschrieben. Wie es zu diesem religiösen Bekenntnis und den damit verbundenen Selbsterfahrungen und -verwirklichungen gekommen ist, fasst sie als *inner-religiösen Dialog* zusammen. Als *intra-religiösen Dialog* bezeichnet sie ihre Erfahrungen im Austausch mit Glaubensschwestern und -brüdern innerhalb hinduistischer Gemeinschaften, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung geschlechtsspezifischer Rollenverteilungen. Die dritte Kategorie, der *inter-religiöse Dialog*, handelt von

²² Many famous persons from the Hindu tradition tried out other religions without any fear of contact and were also open to the possibility of changing (e.g. Ramakrishna and Gandhi).

ihren Begegnungen mit (meist christlichen) Andersgläubigen in der deutschen Gesellschaft, vorwiegend im Rahmen interreligiöser Veranstaltungen, Seminare und Organisationen. Bei ihren Schlussfolgerungen und Konsequenzen, die sie aus ihren persönlichen Erfahrungen im interreligiösen Dialog gezogen hat, betont sie besonders, das philosophisch-religiöse Ideal der einen Religion, wie es in ihrer jeweiligen „heiligen“ Schrift dargelegt ist und in ihren Grundsätzen besteht, nicht mit der sozialisations- und traditionsbedingten Realität einer anderen Religion zu vergleichen.

En este artículo se tratan diferentes temas: primero se describe la evolución de una mujer que creció en el entorno alemán-cristiano y que luego se convirtió a una religión totalmente “ajena”, al hinduismo. Ella habla de *diálogo religioso interno* cuando describe cómo fue que encontró esta fe, la autovivencia y la autorrealización que la llevaron al hinduismo. El *diálogo intrareligioso* es para ella la interacción con sus hermanas y hermanos en la fe, dentro de las comunidades hinduistas, teniendo en cuenta especialmente el reparto de roles por sexos. La tercera categoría es el *diálogo interreligioso*, o sea, sus encuentros con personas de otra fe (en su mayoría cristianas) en la sociedad alemana, sobre todo en actividades interreligiosas, talleres y organizaciones. Al sacar las conclusiones de sus experiencias personales con el diálogo interreligioso la autora subraya sobre todo que el ideal filosófico-religioso de una religión, tal y como queda plasmado en las respectivas “sagradas escrituras” y en los fundamentos de dicha religión no debe compararse con la realidad de otra religión, resultado de la socialización y de la tradición.

Alice Schumann (*1959), Study of Philosophy in Cologne (1979-1981), Studies of Spanish, German philology, journalism and religious studies (1981-1985), Study of the Vedas, Hinduism, pilgrimage and development aid in India (1985-1999); since 1994 director of the Hindu charitable organisation “Food for Life” in Germany; 2000 Diploma in social education; finishing a thesis in pedagogy at Cologne University on “Pro-sociality in Hinduism”.