

Memorial service held by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Göttingen for  
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Martin Tamcke on February 4, 2026

**Commemorative speech by Markus Meckel**

**Martin Tamcke as a Teacher, Inspirer, Networker, and Friend**

**An Attempt at a Tribute**

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I received the invitation to give the memorial speech for Martin Tamcke here today, I was very pleased that this event would take place and that it would provide an opportunity to come together and remember Martin Tamcke—to share our thoughts about what he meant to us, what he did for theology and for our church—how he became an inspiration for many to take on a shared Christian responsibility for the world. You can already tell from this first sentence that I had and still have great admiration for this man, who became my friend.

That is precisely why I immediately wondered how I should tackle this task, as I felt completely overwhelmed by it—and it was only after consulting with and receiving the promise of help and support from some of his companions that I agreed to speak here today.

The first common theme that brought Martin Tamcke and me into contact with each other was our commitment to the recognition of the genocide of the Armenians and other persecuted Christians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. In 2005, I was heavily involved in the Bundestag resolution on the 90th anniversary of the genocide and held many discussions on the subject at the time. Armenia ultimately remained a common theme until the last weeks of his life.

The first invitation to Göttingen 15 years ago was for a fireside chat, followed the next year by a lecture as part of the Euroculture study program, and later his 60th birthday, the commemorative publication, and more. We also became close personally surprisingly quickly, and became trusted friends. His connection to the Hermannsburg Mission and my upbringing in the Berlin Mission House were discoveries I made later that revealed similar roots. It was wonderful not only to meet one-on-one, but also as a foursome, with his wife Elisabeth and my wife Petra Jürgens, who passed away last year. To my great joy, Petra maintained her own contact with Elisabeth and Martin until his final weeks.

Even the first invitations to Göttingen were fascinating for me. The international crowd of students and doctoral candidates, especially, but not only, from the Orthodox world of Europe and the Middle East, and the open, welcoming atmosphere that somehow united everyone into a community. I had never experienced this at any other university before. It was Martin Tamcke's downright affectionate way of dealing with them, a relaxed and connected manner based on respect, that impressed me deeply! He was obviously not only a fascinating teacher, but also someone who cared for each individual, a pastor and encourager at the same time. And then there was his warmth, his laughter!

In my first lecture, I talked about Europe in transition after the Cold War—about how Europe had to reinvent itself after 1990 (EU enlargement, deepening integration/constitution). He emphasized the need to see Europe from the perspective of non-Europeans, to incorporate their

views into our own European future, and to overcome the usual Eurocentric perspective. This new perspective was particularly present here in Göttingen—through him, people came together here, contributed their own views, and were heard. The encounter opened up unknown worlds that challenged us to reflect on our own.

So I began to read—and was overwhelmed by how he made the subject of his research, Orthodoxy, the subject of open encounter. After an appearance in Göttingen in 2011, he gave me his book on Tolstoy's religion, noting that Tolstoy had preoccupied him since his youth. Tamcke's books and texts on Orthodoxy are numerous and, for me, almost impossible to survey. However, he not only wrote academic literature but also attempted to open up avenues of understanding the “spirituality of the East” for readers who were initially unfamiliar with the subject. Although my father, Ernst-Eugen Meckel, accompanied the discussions between the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR and the Russian Orthodox Church as secretary, Orthodoxy remained foreign to me for a long time, and it was only from Martin that I learned more about this rich spirituality to which he had opened himself so deeply. This allowed me to experience for myself what Vasilica Magurel Paralucă later said about Martin Tamcke in the commemorative publication—that he was “forever on the road as an ambassador of Orthodoxy in the West” (FS II, p. 740).

Many years ago, Paul Tillich emphasized in his Systematic Theology that theology as a science must convey that its subject matter is an “object of infinite passion” (PT, Syst Theol I, Stuttgart 1956, p. 19). This was precisely the experience one had with Martin Tamcke. His teaching was not dry textbook knowledge, but lively and always connected to existential questions—it brought the head and the heart together. Research thus remained not just a matter for the study, but was complemented and enriched by a life of encounter. For him, science had to be “human-centered.” For him, science took place in encounters—with texts, how could it be otherwise, but also, necessarily, with people. And that is not a matter of course in our academic work today. Only in encounter, he was convinced, do insights open up, a deeper seeing. Dialogue—authentic personal conversation on substantial questions—reveals truth, in listening, on equal terms, in becoming familiar with one another and gaining trust. In her introduction to the commemorative publication for his 60th birthday, Claudia Rammelt reminds very convincingly of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's “The Little Prince,” where he names “getting to know each other” as the basis for friendship and human encounter (FS I, p. 7).

Anyone who studied with Martin Tamcke and joined him in this search for truth in encounter will hear his voice in the speaking and listening of this message, which he repeated again and again. Words accompanied by the movement of his hands—turned toward the other person:

I AM NOT YOU

And you are not me.

But I am also not simply separate from you,

And you are not simply separate from me.

There is something of you in me,

just as there is something of me in you.

When interaction between us occurs,

I work on you in me,

just as you work on me in you.

For a better understanding of each other,  
as a value in itself.

Among us is Prof. Wolfgang Hage, his teacher, fellow campaigner, confidant, and friend, with whom Martin Tamcke traveled an important part of the way together—in learning languages, in reading and meditating on texts, and in concrete encounters with living Christians who live in this tradition. Thus, research led to concrete encounters, and church history became an ecumenical challenge.

The churches of the East were Martin Tamcke's main focus—but not only the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe, but also the ancient Churches of the Middle East and North Africa, India, and China. In these Churches, we encounter our history, but not as something that is past, but as a living present. Controversial issues in Church and dogmatic history become immediately apparent when we encounter them. He was fascinated by this historically grown plurality of Churches, the different experiences, perspectives, and ways of thinking about faith that had taken shape. He sought not only to explain this, but to understand it with acceptance, firmly convinced that the truth of Jesus Christ is alive in all of them. Martin Tamcke: “I would rather look for the unity that I have always assumed exists beyond our separation on earth. (FS II, p. 34). Seeing and recognizing this, however, is hard theological work, to which he devoted his life: “We must reclaim what we have in common! [...] In my opinion, it is seeing, mutual seeing, that leads to seeing the self” (p. 35).

Traveling, encountering churches and believers in their ancestral homes and cultures, entering into conversation with them—this had been Martin Tamcke's particular profile since his student days. Later, this led to visiting professorships with extended stays in the Middle East, India, and Ethiopia, as well as in the US and Finland. This also included partnerships with Muslim faculties in Turkey and Egypt. Getting to know and participating in the religious life and spirituality of fellow Orthodox Christians, living alongside them in monasteries—all this enriched not only his research, but also his own existence. On these trips, he did not only seek contact with the elites of science, Churches, and society. He also turned to ordinary students or chance encounters with interest and empathy. I myself have experienced—and others here have told me that they have, too—that time and again on my travels I met people who said to me: “I know someone in Germany, too!”—and that was Martin Tamcke. He often maintained such contacts via Facebook. Among others, we were also connected in this way.

His travels were not limited to his own personal experiences. His stays and encounters abroad often led to partnerships between faculties, combined with student exchanges and invitations for young academics to come to Göttingen to obtain scientific qualifications.

Thanks to Martin Tamcke's initiative, the Syrologentag (Syrian Studies Day) has been held every two years since 1998, bringing together experts who study Syrian Christianity to share their research findings. Many of these have been published in the Syriaca series of Göttingen Oriental Studies, which he oversaw.

Early on, Prof. Tamcke created the international Erasmus Mundus study program “Euroculture,” which he directed for many years. As a result, Göttingen itself became more and more a lively place of encounter and cross-cultural exchange. These degree programs included stimulating study trips, often to the various partner faculties in the countries of the study area, where students got to know their intellectual and social environment.

The establishment of the international master's program "Intercultural Theology" in the Faculty of Theology was also particularly important—Prof. Wasmuth has already mentioned this. Martin Tamcke developed this together with Prof. Frieder Ludwig from Hermannsburg, where Martin Tamcke taught at the Hermannsburg Mission Seminary before his appointment here. This led to the establishment of the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology in Hermannsburg, which was responsible for this program together with the Göttingen faculty. There was a real campus there, where students initially also lived for two semesters—so that students from the Orient and Africa, from Turkey, America, and Asia could meet and come together in a close-knit community. They shared a common everyday life, held devotions, prayed, and sang—and also argued, whether about the ordination of women or the recognition of homosexuality. One can imagine that this was a challenge for everyone.

His teaching and the many forms of encounter, his travels, were accompanied by his writing. He was always under pressure to finish an article, a lecture, or even a book. His bibliography is truly overwhelming, both in terms of the number of publications and the wealth and breadth of topics. One wonders when this man found the time to write all this alongside his teaching and traveling.

Here is a shocking story that the Schlarbs told me: Martin's parked car had been broken into and robbed. Unfortunately, he had left his bag in the car—with his laptop, which he always carried with him. On it was the almost finished manuscript of a book—and there was no current backup! Many of us can imagine what a disaster that meant! He then rewrote the manuscript...

Claudia Rammelt and Cornelia and Egbert Schlarb, who were close friends of Martin Tamcke, published extensive commemorative publications for him, which reflect the profound scientific and existential dialogue on a wide range of questions and topics. The various authors from many countries provide deep insights into the discovery, perception, and fruitfulness of these ancient traditions, Christian roots, and their cultural and historical developments.

Studying the Oriental Churches and their history also involved learning about their centuries-long experience of Christians and Muslims living together. These experiences, which cannot be reduced to a common denominator, have received little attention in Europe. Martin Tamcke took them very seriously and asked, not least, what it does to a church to live "as a minority" and, not infrequently, in a state of uncertainty that is both constant and acute. For many years, he had a significant influence on the study program of the "Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS)" "Study in the Middle East (SiMO)", which enabled students from Germany and Western Europe to study at the "Near East School of Theology (NEST)" in Beirut and gain their own experiences in Lebanon—particularly in the coexistence of Christians and Muslims. Martin Tamcke was filled with a deep empathy for suffering peoples, for marginalized and oppressed ethnic groups and minorities. This preoccupied him existentially and caused him great suffering. He always stood up for their freedom and their ability to make their own decisions.

He condemned Putin's imperial war against Ukraine and the Patriarch's support for it, but at the same time considered the blanket break with decentralized actors and universities in Russia to be wrong, because it deprived them of the opportunity to accompany critical voices in Russia itself.

It was important to him to remember the suffering of the Armenians and to ensure that the genocide of the Armenians and Syrian Christians in 1915 was recognized internationally, including in Turkey. These were difficult processes everywhere, including in Germany. I was able to witness this firsthand between 2005 and 2016, when it was finally achieved. To this day, the genocide remains a taboo subject in Turkey.

In this complex history of Christians in predominantly Muslim societies, which had already undergone many upheavals in the 20th century, the Iraq War at the beginning of our millennium was a stroke of fate. The Iraq War and the global war on Islamic terrorism, declared after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, had devastating consequences in many ways. In the Western world, and also here in Germany, the adjective “fundamentalist” became a fixed prefix in discussions of Islam: “fundamentalist Islam”—as if every form of Islam were fundamentalist. (At the same time, it was ignored that there is equally devastating fundamentalist Christianity—and not only in the USA, where it is bearing such unfortunate fruit today. But that is a new topic.) As a result, Islam often became a socially hostile concept. We still feel the consequences of this development today when it comes to issues of migration.

On the other hand, the Iraq War also radicalized the policies of the ruling elites in the countries of the Middle East. The consequences were borne not least by the long-established Christians and Churches of the Orient, whose situation became increasingly unbearable. Thousands fled war, extremism, and violence, greatly reducing the presence of Christians in this part of the world. Many also came to us in Germany. And here they want to live as Christians in the community of faith in their own congregations. This has now happened in many cases, often under the most difficult conditions, but the process is still ongoing.

From the very beginning, Martin Tamcke saw it as his task, but also that of our Churches, to help these Christians and their communities—and to be their partners. This also included very concrete help. Those who participated in these courses with him learned about the living conditions of these communities through excursions and encounters. Spiritual participation and fellowship in worship and theological discussion were also important. Five years ago (in September 2021), I myself had the opportunity to visit the monastery of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Brenkhausen/Höxter, which is led by Bishop Anba Damian. An international conference organized by Martin Tamcke and his colleagues on precisely this topic took place there: “Europe and the Migration of Christian Communities from the Middle East.”

Martin Tamcke's theological outreach work repeatedly led him to become involved in social and political issues. In an article for the second commemorative publication, Uwe Gräbe writes impressively about confidential conferences on Syria held by a Protestant academy and the church relief organization between 2014 and 2018, at which representatives of various social forces came together for discussions with the help of Martin Tamcke. “During all these Syria conferences, it was quite astonishing to witness how much Martin Tamcke is respected by all sides and how easily he moves between the diverging contexts: Mostly listening intently, then explaining, ‘translating,’ never taking a one-sided position—and often captivating those who were stuck in bitterness or grief with his loud, hearty laughter. ... And so Martin Tamcke demonstrates an intercultural border-crossing that could not be better imagined” (Gräbe, p. 595f). I was shocked when, immediately after Assad's fall in Syria, voices were raised in our country saying that Syrians should now go back there. It reminded me of the AfD's plans to organize a strategic remigration. Martin Tamcke would certainly have been involved in countering such sentiments and plans.

I myself was able to contribute to Martin Tamcke's efforts in the last years of his life, together with his colleagues Andreas Müller, Dagmar Heller, Harut Harutyunyan, and others, to protect the cultural heritage of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh—with public appeals, an academic conference in Armenia, and the publication of a book.

We were stunned to see how, in July 2022, the President of the European Commission signed an energy agreement with Azerbaijan without mentioning this issue at all. You can imagine his—and

our—shock when Azerbaijan finally conquered Artsakh militarily, 100,000 Armenians saved their lives by fleeing—and thus the centuries-long Armenian settlement of this region came to an end.

We have already heard from Mr. OKR Stelter how important Martin Tamcke's cooperation and suggestions were in the dialogue committees of the Protestant Church—both at the regional Church level and for the EKD. Here, he was particularly committed to dialogue with the Oriental Churches. He was deeply concerned and critical of the fact that the Christian Orient is increasingly being overlooked in our Church, but also in theological faculties. For he was convinced that "no area is as suitable for practicing non-European Christianity as the Oriens Christianus from China to the Horn of Africa. This also applies to questions of intercultural theology, which must be pursued most intensively in the Middle East. (...) It is a whole world waiting to be appreciated as the place where everything that has made us what we are today originated" (FS I, p. 18). He was often dissatisfied with the results—and yet he set many things in motion. As early as 2015, Martin said in a conversation with Claudia Rammelt: "Whether the churches of Europe will grow into a more intense relationship with their brothers and sisters on the margins of Europe, ... whether European Christians will feel responsible for the cultural heritage of Christianity in the East ... and engage there, living in solidarity through dialogue, remains to be seen" (ibid., p. 17). He hoped for it very much and worked hard to achieve it!

It was not only in the last two years of his life that Martin Tamcke went through a lot in terms of his health. For many years he suffered from tinnitus, he had long been restricted by diabetes and was in poor health overall. He also did not really understand how to take it easy—he was too driven by the many tasks he saw and felt committed to.

In his last Christmas letter in 2023, one could sense how much Martin struggled with no longer being able to do many of the tasks he had taken on. He expressed gratitude that some trips for lectures were still possible in a reduced form, but especially for the help of his doctoral students with the move, which he would not have been able to manage otherwise. Less visible throughout his years of work, but an indispensable foundation for the last difficult period of his life, was the support and care provided by his wife, Elisabeth.

Martin Tamcke passed away on November 2, 2024. We miss his bright eyes, his suggestions and initiatives – and his laughter.

We commend him to our Lord Jesus Christ and will not forget him.

Thank you.