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Effects of interreligious learning processes on prospective teachers at St. Gallen University of Teacher Education in the field of Ethics, Religions and Community (ERG)

Quantitative and Qualitative findings of an exploratory study

1. Introduction

Like in other European countries, Switzerland is also experiencing a societal shift characterised by heterogeneity. This can converge or diverge, but it can also present challenges, especially in an educational context. The PHSG (University of Teacher Education, St. Gallen) aims to respond to this reality through its degree programmes by preparing prospective teachers authentically and optimally for contemporary teaching. This is achieved by integrating an interreligious approach into teacher education, particularly in the basic module ERG (Ethics, Religions, Community) and in specialised ERG studies.

In 2017, the PHSG established a centre for ethical and interreligious learning, which primarily focuses on research in this thematic area.

After first outlining the current research on the topic of interreligious learning in educational practice at PHSG within the framework of KIAL, while also addressing the relevance of the topic, I will elaborate on the objective of the work done at PHSG and, consequently, of the article presented here. Based on relevant research questions and a theoretical framework of the subject, the key findings of the empirical study will be highlighted. Eventually, the discussion culminates in a conclusion, which not only points out lim-

itations but also formulates a possible outlook. The findings presented here were obtained as part of my master's thesis at Danube University in Krems within the master's programme *Islam and Migrations* in Europe and are summarised here.

1.1 The Current State of Research

Interreligious learning aims to develop competencies in interreligious encounters and an understanding of cultural hermeneutics. While it can be used in the context of political integration debates, interreligious learning should not be misused and must serve to build intercultural and interreligious skills through theoretically and didactically responsible learning settings and situations. Although interreligious learning cannot solve all social problems, as they are often complex and have various causes, it can enhance understanding and differentiation competence¹ among future teachers.

Both in Switzerland² and internationally³, the importance of addressing religious diversity has been recognised. In Switzerland, the development of a new curriculum by the German-speaking Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education has addressed this through the subjects Nature-Humans-Society (NMG) taught in the first and second cycles and Ethics, Religions, Community (ERG) in the third cycle. These subjects pursue goals that can also be counted among the objectives of interreligious learning, such as linking the lifeworlds of students, their experiences and interests, and their religious environment.⁴

1.2 Relevance of the Topic

Research within the framework of KIAL has examined theoretically possible approaches to the evaluation of interreligious learning pro-

1 For the understanding of the term *differentiation competence* in educational processes, see Dressler 2021.

2 Federal Migration Commission, n.d.

3 OSCE 2007, 14 / Rothgangel/Jackson/Jäggle 2014.

4 Bietenhard/Helbling/Schmid 2015.

cesses in various phases and applied them practically. This has allowed valuable insights to be gained and conceptually substantiated. A central goal was the development of generalised categories that facilitate the comparability of interreligious learning processes and examine their effectiveness.⁵ This is particularly important because many didactic approaches and methods exist for interreligious learning processes, but their effectiveness has hardly been studied so far. There is a lack of generalised categories that allow comparisons between different research approaches. Only through comparison can evaluation standards be developed that enable the assessment of the effectiveness of different theories and methods according to clear criteria. This makes it possible to identify and optimise the limitations of previous teaching and learning methods in interreligiously designed teaching/learning settings in an evidence-based manner.

On a scholarly level, systematic analyses are facilitated, allowing for the transfer of research findings without significant barriers. This can create a well-founded knowledge base aimed at enhancing subject-specific understanding. For prospective teachers, comparable data allows for the formulation of targeted competencies, thereby improving their practice. This, in turn, leads to an increase in learning quality for students, as the quality of learning is based on proven methods regarding their effectiveness. The development of intercultural and interreligious competence can thus be achieved for future teachers at PHSG and their future students in classrooms in an evidence-based and theory-driven manner.

1.3 Aims and Research Questions

Improving and optimising interreligious teaching and learning processes is one of the research goals of KIAL. Learners, stakeholders and educational content have been key to this endeavour. These three components have been crucial in both qualitative and quantitative studies. To investigate the self-positioning of prospective teachers at PHSG in interreligious learning processes and to empha-

5 Suhner/Winter-Pfändler, 2022.

sise the necessity of their self-positioning, research questions were developed that considered stakeholders and content equally.

In both the initial project phase and the subsequent phase within the framework of the master's thesis, the focus was on how interreligious learning situations are perceived by the students, what impact they have on the learners, and how they evaluate and communicate their new insights. In addition to the interest in understanding the effects of interreligious learning processes, which is addressed through the empirical part, another central aim of this article and the preceding master's thesis is to shed light on the academic discourses on the topic and to contribute to that body of work. In particular, the Islamic theological component of interreligious learning within this work is not viewed in isolation but is situated within discourses that also have connections to Christian theology.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section highlights the theoretical embedding of interreligious learning from two essential perspectives: religious educational approaches and Islamic theological viewpoints. While both approaches are briefly presented together, the focus in theological discussions is more strongly on explicitly Islamic theological aspects. This is due to the fact that Islamic religious educational positions are often developed within the context of denominationally cooperative approaches in Christian religious education and rarely exhibit isolated Muslim elements.

2.1 Religious Educational Perspective on Interreligious Learning

Since the 1990s, the term “interreligious learning” has been recognised in the German-speaking world⁶, inspired by intercultural learning, which does not focus on religion.⁷ Schweitzer describes

6 Rickers 2002.

7 Auernheimer 1990.

interreligious learning as “learning that relates to more than one religion”.⁸ He emphasises that the term is comparatively non-committal and defines interreligious education as follows:

Interreligious education is a dimension of education that relates to the perception of one’s own and other religions and their relationship to each other, aiming for dialogical attitudes based on mutual understanding, and enabling peaceful coexistence, tolerance, recognition of the other, and respect for each other.⁹

This paper is situated both in general religious education and in Islamic religious education, as its integration into educational discourses is not only academically relevant but also has significant practical implications for the University of Teacher Education in St. Gallen (PHSG).

They are also understood as theological treatises following Nipkow’s approach, which pursues a convergence theory and examines the relationship between pedagogy and theology.¹⁰ Similarly, they also place themselves within religious studies discourses, considering Willems’ suggestion that religious studies should be viewed as a reference discipline for pedagogy alongside theology and educational science.¹¹

With regard to the significance of interreligious learning in religious education, two main positions are represented. One position advocates interreligious learning in response to growing pluralism and aims to counteract increasing exclusionary tendencies (Schweitzer, 2022, p. 6). The other position questions the limits of interreligious learning and highlights its potential risks. Educational science emphasises the danger of the “religionisation” and “othering” of social, political and material conflicts.¹² This can result in neglecting other sources of conflict by focusing on interreligious ex-

8 Schweitzer 2022, 9.

9 Schweitzer 2014, 132. In the original, the text reads: “Interreligiöse Bildung ist eine Dimension von Bildung, die sich auf die Wahrnehmung eigener und anderer Religionen und ihr Verhältnis zueinander bezieht, die auf wechselseitigem Verstehen beruhende dialogische Einstellungen anstrebt und zu einem gesellschaftlichen Zusammenleben im Sinne von Frieden und Toleranz, Anerkennung des Anderen und Respekt voreinander befähigt.”

10 Nipkow 1998.

11 Willems 2011, 16.

12 Lingen-Ali/Mecheril 2016.

planations. Thus, interreligious learning is balanced between these poles of tension and requires at least pedagogical plausibility. In line with Oelkers, it is important to note that educational science tends to marginalise religion, while simultaneously opposing cultural and religious interpretations of conflicts in coexistence.¹³ Interreligious learning is also debated within general religious education, with some questioning its role in a school context¹⁴ and others interpreting it as a mandate that extends beyond religious instruction.¹⁵

The critique of “culturalism” in intercultural pedagogy, where culture is considered a “fluid entity”, cannot be directly transferred to religions in interreligious learning. Culture lacks clear boundaries, while religions are based on communities and common premises.¹⁶

Interreligious learning can also be well-founded from an educational theory perspective¹⁷ and aims to develop the ability to engage with pluralism, taking into account human rights and fundamental rights through reflective engagement with beliefs and religious interpretations. Research literature highlights various phenomena that illustrate the complexity of interreligious education, including migration¹⁸, globalisation¹⁹, displacement²⁰ and integration issues.²¹ Proponents of interreligious learning emphasise its integration into all areas of education. The perspective from which interreligious learning processes are viewed is gaining importance. Different approaches are discussed, such as the denominational approach²², the denominationally-cooperative perspective²³, and the ideologically-pluralistic perspective.²⁴

13 Oelkers 2003.

14 Dressler 2003.

15 Jäggle 2015.

16 Schweitzer 2022.

17 Benner et al. 2011.

18 Rahner /Schambeck 2011.

19 Simojoki 2012.

20 Polak et al. 2018.

21 Biesinger et al. 2012.

22 Sajak 2005 / Schweitzer 2014.

23 Sejdini/Kraml/Scharer 2017 / Mecheril 2010.

24 Doedens/Weiße 1997.

The question of a sustainable approach to religious education is raised, with various authors recommending that students engage in both perspective-taking and perspective-switching. The ERG (Ethics, Religions and Communities) curriculum also emphasises perspective-switching, enabling students to reflect on their own viewpoints and adopt other perspectives, as outlined in Curriculum 21. Numerous authors provide insights into this debate and stress the importance of a comprehensive approach to promoting interreligious education.

From the perspective of Islamic religious education, interreligious learning is regarded as highly significant. Some see a fundamental openness to interreligious tendencies within their own religious traditions and emphasise the necessity of participation in interreligious processes.²⁵

Muslims generally agree that Islam is part of the same monotheistic religious tradition to which Judaism and Christianity belong. It does not matter whether Islam is considered as a complement to, or substitute for, Judaism and Christianity; what remains clear is that Islam cannot avoid engaging with these religious traditions—regardless of the motivation—in establishing an appropriate correlation [with] and understanding of Islam from a theological perspective.²⁶

Interreligious learning processes are reflected upon by Muslim religious educators from a Muslim perspective, even though this mainly involves publications with a cooperative-denominational perspective.²⁷ The treatment of other religions in the training of Islamic religious teachers is highlighted by authors such as Kamcili-Yildiz²⁸, who points out the lack of elaboration and testing of approaches to interreligious learning in university didactics.

There is a constructively critical view regarding the potential for conflict in the context of this field, which also exhibits conflict potential.²⁹ Publications critically reflect on Islamic religious educa-

25 Sejdini/Kraml/Scharer 2017.

26 Sejdini 2021.

27 Schweitzer/Boschki/Ulfat 2022 / Schweitzer/Ulfat/Boschki 2021 / Schweitzer/Ulfat/Boschki 2023.

28 Kamcili-Yildiz 2020.

29 Kraml/Sejdini/Bauer 2022.

tional questions and theology in the present.³⁰ Ulfat examines the challenges of postcolonial perspectives on Islamic religious education.³¹

Overall, interreligious learning can be considered an integral part of modern understandings of teaching and is understood as a response to changes in the religious landscape. Various forms of interreligious learning as well as didactic questions are actively discussed and researched in general religious education as well as in Islamic religious education.

2.2 Islamic Theological Perspective on Interreligious Learning

Interreligious learning is also viewed differently within Islamic theological discourses. Müller sees it as rooted in Islam. She emphasises the unity of creation through a common Creator in the Qur'an and considers interreligious learning to be an interactive process. The closeness of God to humans and the sincerity in responding to His mercy are regarded as foundations for this. Although the Qur'an calls for tolerance, a positive attitude towards other religions is not yet widespread among Muslims. The call for cooperation between believers of different religions is also found in the Qur'an.³²

From a Qur'anic perspective, interreligious learning aims to facilitate learning about other religions both within one's own faith and in understanding foreign beliefs. This is highlighted by Müller, who references the Qur'an, specifically verse 83 of Surah 5:

It is ultimately about experiencing interreligiosity in both the familiar and the foreign. History teaches us that this has occasionally been achieved by certain groups. Andalusia or Spain is such an example. The Qur'an impressively confirms this in the case of the Christian community: "And when they (the Christians) hear what has been revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with

30 Sejdini 2015 / Sejdini 2022.

31 Ulfat 2021.

32 Müller 2005.

tears because of the truth they recognize in it. They say: 'Our Lord, we believe, so write us down among the witnesses.'"³³

The author critically notes the unclear relationships with agnostics as well as followers of Hindu and Buddhist religions. She emphasises the necessity for Muslims to develop their own concepts of interreligious learning, rather than unreflectively adopting principles of other religious communities that do not align with their own religious convictions. The research and teaching of the Qur'an are seen as crucial for an authentic understanding of interreligious learning.³⁴

Among the authors with an anthropological understanding of interreligious learning is Abdoldjavad Falaturi, who emphasises empathy between dialogue partners in interreligious dialogue.³⁵ In current publications, the question of truth is discussed as a foundation for reflective interreligious learning. Yaşar Sarıkaya, a contemporary Hadith scholar, analyses the historical development of exclusivist thinking, which is understandable to both Muslims and non-Muslims.³⁶ According to Sarıkaya, the question of truth characterises one of the main features of Abrahamic religions. This assumption suggests that over time, religious claims have been elevated by followers to claims of absolute truth, leading to negative consequences, such as extremism, exclusion and hostilities, and continuing to do so.³⁷

In light of past modernisation and secularisation processes and ongoing equalisation of religions, there are currently controversial discussions about who will attain salvation.³⁸ In the Qur'anic

33 Müller 2005, 146. The original text in German reads as follows: "Es geht letztlich darum, Interreligiosität im Eigenen und im Fremden zu erfahren. Die Geschichte lehrt uns, dass dies hin und wieder einzelnen Gruppierungen auch gelungen ist. Andalusien bzw. Spanien ist ein solches Beispiel. Der Qur'an bestätigt uns dies eindrucksvoll im Falle der christlichen Gemeinschaft: 'Und wenn sie (Die Christinnen und Christen) hören, was zu dem Gesandten herabgesandt worden ist, siehst du ihre Augen von Tränen überfließen ob der Wahrheit, die sie (darin) erkannt haben. Sie sagen: "Unser Herr, wir glauben, so schreibe uns unter die Bezeugenden."'"

34 Müller 2005, 148.

35 Falaturi 2002, 2017.

36 Sarıkaya 2020.

37 Sarıkaya 2020, 133.

38 Cf. Takim 2007.

context, the scriptures of other Abrahamic religions are considered “means of enlightenment”³⁹ and “guidance”.⁴⁰ The call for mutual understanding⁴¹ forms the basis for interreligious learning. Sarıkaya thus justifies not only inclusivism but also pluralism from an Islamic perspective. Many Muslim scholars support this view, such as the Turkish Qur’anic exegete Süleyman Ateş, who applies new methods in Qur’anic exegesis. Ateş belongs to the Qur’anic exegetes of the 20th century, who were challenged by Western colonialism and the dominance of the West. They had to keep pace with modern scientific knowledge to establish harmony between Qur’anic content and scientific perspectives. Abū Zaid views the Qur’an from a literary perspective and advocates a humanistic understanding.⁴²

Both Muslim scholars and political decision-makers like Ali Bardakoğlu, who held the position of head of the religious affairs authority in Turkey at the beginning of the new millennium, advocate embracing diversity positively. Bardakoğlu emphasises that diversity should be considered the unmistakable will of God according to certain Qur’anic verses⁴³ and can be understood as divine wisdom. He stresses that only God has the right to judge, not humans. Furthermore, Sarıkaya states that the ‘good things’ that Bardakoğlu speaks of encompass innovative and creative ideas in all areas of religious, cultural and social life. These views illustrate how Muslim thinkers and leaders consider diversity to be an essential and divinely intended aspect of human existence, forming the basis for interreligious learning.⁴⁴ In addition to the personalities mentioned, the South African scholar Farid Esack, the Pakistani philosopher Fazlur Rahman and the contemporary philosopher and theologian Abdoul-Karim Soroush play a crucial role in the discourse on pluralism in Islam.⁴⁵

Mouhanad Khorchide and Muna Tatari are significant representatives of the pluralistic theological perspective as described by John

39 Qur’an 23:49.

40 Qur’an 17:2.

41 Qur’an 49:13/5:48/2:62.

42 Abū-Zaid/Hildebrandt 2008.

43 Qur’an 5:48/11:118.

44 Bardakoğlu 2017 / Sarıkaya 2020, 136.

45 Cf. Lamptey 2014.

Hick.⁴⁶ Khorchide emphasises the appreciation of different truths, while Tatari engages in comparative theology.

According to Sarıkaya⁴⁷, contingency-conscious interreligious learning encompasses encounters, the recognition of otherness and curiosity. However, it is critically noted that appreciation and curiosity could potentially lead to imbalances. Milad Karimi views the search for truth as a lifelong process in which ethical action forms its foundation. This perspective shares similarities with mystical beliefs.⁴⁸ Erlo Yıldız introduces a sociological–educational perspective, suggesting that individual life realities can shape the concept of truth for interreligious learning.⁴⁹

At the academic level, there seems to be a consensus that interreligious learning requires contingency-conscious actions that attribute equal value to other religions in achieving salvation. However, it remains unclear how these perspectives can be brought into society and how interreligious learning processes can be supported. There is a challenge in creating historical awareness that is marked by exclusion. The impacts of a contingency-conscious attitude on teachers and students are not yet clear and may bring about pedagogical challenges.

In summary, interdisciplinary exchange in theology contributes to diversity. Open questions provide avenues for research, while existing discourses offer an overview and historical context. In particular, the focus is on religious education, especially Islamic RE, and theological frameworks for contemporary interreligious learning. The discussion here can thus support the advancement of these disciplines.

2.3 Additional Theoretical Concepts in the Analysis

The concept of sensitising concepts by Kelle and Kluge was extensively utilised in the surveys.⁵⁰ It is based on the assumption that re-

46 John Hick 2005.

47 Sarıkaya 2020.

48 Schimmel 1992.

49 Yıldız 2020.

50 Kelle/Kluge 2010, 28 f.

searchers already have preconceptions and that empirical results are not independent of the researchers' prior knowledge. Researchers use their previous experience to view data through a specific lens based on their prior knowledge. It is emphasised that the development of categories and concepts cannot take place before data collection. Nonetheless, Kelle and Kluge emphasise the perspective of researchers in the reconstruction in social research. They emphasise the heuristic utility when a theory-driven analysis of the data is conducted.⁵¹ In relation to the educational content, which constitutes a component of interreligious learning in the study, the dimensions of religion as outlined in the "Sachbuch Religionen"⁵² were utilised in line with the sensitising concepts approach by Kelle and Kluge. Since this reference book is utilised in the specialised studies of Religious Education (ERG) and serves as mandatory reading for the compulsory ERG module, these dimensions, aligning with insights from research on interreligious learning, are particularly well-suited for generating results regarding the educational content within interreligious learning processes.

3. Empirical Investigation

3.1 Research Design and Methodology

The agential realism framework by Karen Barad served as the basis for examining interreligious learning processes within the context of KIAL, considering them to be phenomena. These phenomena can only be captured through observations and do not depict their actual nature.⁵³ The approach emphasises the role of material-discursive practices in constructing the world, viewing matter as an active part of the process.⁵⁴ For the investigation of interreligious learning, material practices such as research systems, theories and practices were taken into account. Design-based research proved to be suitable for integrating practice-oriented and theory-based re-

51 Kelle/Kluge 2010, 28–40.

52 Bühler/Bühlmann/Kessler 2021.

53 Suhner/Winter-Pfändler 2022, 19.

54 Barad/Schröder 2012.

search and conducting investigations focusing on educational content, the learners themselves and stakeholders as components of interreligious learning.

A total of 8 group interviews were conducted with students specialising in religious education (ERG) at the University of Teacher Education in St. Gallen. The interviews were conducted in stages, with pre-tests in December 2018 and the main interviews the following year. A questionnaire was used in addition to the interviews to gather quantitative data, while the interviews focused on qualitative aspects. The questionnaire covered three components of interreligious competence: educational content, modes of religious exploration and stakeholders.

After transcribing the interviews, they were analysed using the MAXQDA software programme. Due to a small number of participants in the first phase, further investigations with a larger sample size were conducted in the second phase, which was the core part of the master's thesis.

In the fall semester of 2022, 83 students were reached through the questionnaire as part of the quality management survey. The questionnaire was expanded to include a Muslim perspective and was digitised. Students from the ERG basic module filled out the questionnaire anonymously. The results were quantitatively analysed, presented and interpreted. They built upon the previous research of KIAL and supplemented qualitative insights with quantitative aspects.

The dimensions of religion, as described in the textbook "Religions", were primarily used for the component of educational content based on sensitising concepts by Kelle and Kluge. These dimensions were chosen because they were familiar to the respondents and aligned with research findings.⁵⁵

The perspective of learners in interreligious learning processes is examined using the four modes of religious exploration by Karlo Meyer.⁵⁶ This model takes into account learners' perceptions regarding the exploration of religion and is therefore in line with the research interests of KIAL. Meyer's model is applied using sensi-

55 Cf. Leimgruber 2007.

56 Karlo Meyer 2019.

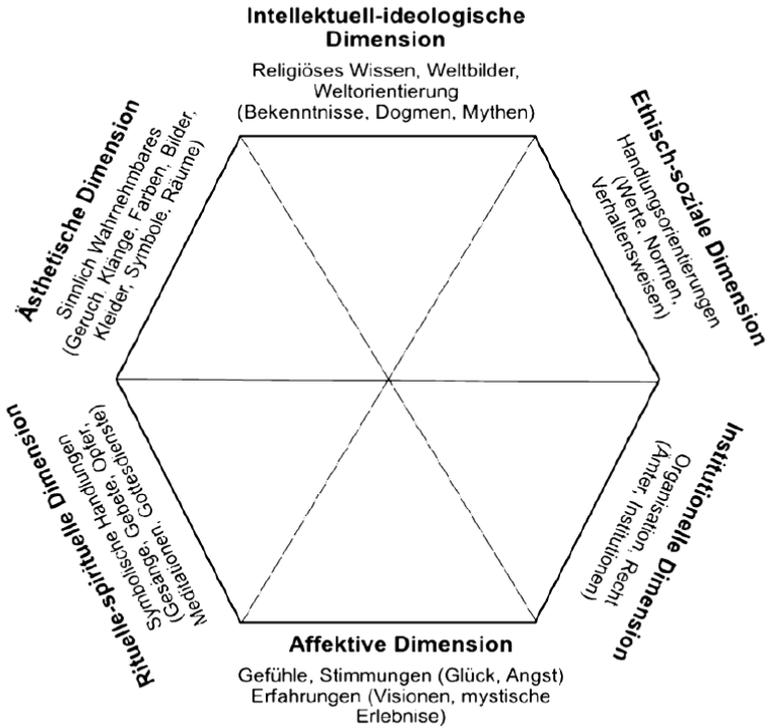


Figure 1: Dimensions of religion-related educational content, adapted from: Bühler et al., 2015, p. 22 and p. 26 from the research report on the qualitative-explorative study at the University of Teacher Education in St. Gallen (PHSG).

tising concepts to analyse how learners approach and engage with religious exploration.

A third component has been introduced in the field of ERG (Ethics, Religion and Community) concerning the educational policy situation and inquiries into the responsibilities and potential of stakeholders in interreligious learning. This new component is specifically tailored to various stakeholders, such as representatives of different religious communities, educators and lecturers, without the use of sensitising concepts, as described by Suhner & Winter-Pfändler.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Suhner/Winter-Pfändler 2022.

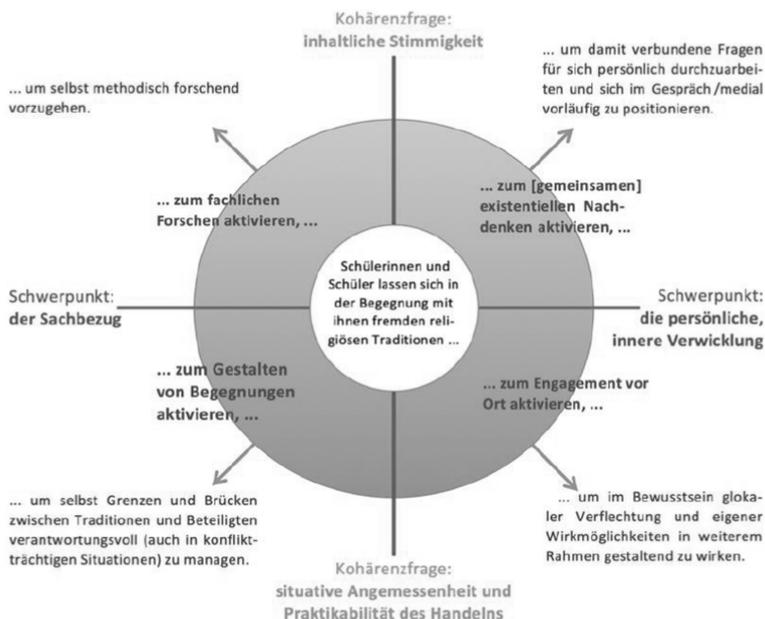


Figure 2: Modes of Religious Exploration as a graphical model, adapted from: K. Meyer (2019), “Foundations of Interreligious Learning”, p. 178, from the research report on the qualitative-exploratory study at the University of Teacher Education in St. Gallen (PHSG).

3.2 Presentation of the Results

A detailed discussion of the data from the first survey phase would go beyond the scope of this article. The data from the second phase, which form the core of my master’s thesis and are central to this article, are of particular relevance and are summarised here.

If we focus on the learners themselves, the majority of the group consisted of females, followed by a small number of male respondents. Most of the students were between 20–25 years old, with only a few over 25. The participants were predominantly from Switzerland, but there was also a number of Swiss individuals with roots in other countries. Some indicated having a different nationality, with Liechtenstein and Germany being frequently mentioned, along with

other countries, such as Austria, Portugal, the Netherlands, Italy and North Macedonia, represented to a lesser extent.

The absolute majority of 59 students belonged to Christianity, primarily Catholicism, followed by Protestant Reformed and Orthodox Christianity. The second largest group consisted of those who did not affiliate with any religion, followed by a small group of Muslims and three students who were undecided. Analysis of non-Christian affiliations shows that two-thirds of the Muslims were of Sunni-Hanafi orientation. There were also multiple entries as the study they concerned individual feelings of belonging rather than institutional ties, which led to overlaps in responses.

Following a survey on demographic data, the study included questions on the participants' religious attitudes, followed by questions on interreligious learning. The analysis of these data highlights the significance of religiosity in the respondents' lives and their attitudes towards interreligious learning. It becomes evident that for almost half of the participants, religion or religious matters are scarcely relevant in their own lives. The respondents rarely believe in divine intervention and show little to no engagement with sacred texts. The results suggest that the ethical considerations and actions of the respondents often operate independently from religious concepts. Participation in religious practices is low overall, with especially low attendance rates at religious services observed among the Jewish respondents. Generally, the religiosity of the respondents and their participation in religious activities appear variable and not strongly pronounced.

Church congregations and churches in Switzerland tend to be more accessible compared to places of worship for other religious communities, as they are often centrally located and regionally distributed. Buddhist and Hindu temples are not as widespread, and mosques are less visible, with them being typically located in industrial areas. This might explain why attendance at church services is higher compared to visits to temples or mosques.

On an individual level, about half of the respondents never pray, while a substantial portion prays from several times a year to daily. Regarding meditation, about a third of the respondents practice it regularly, while the majority never meditate. It is notable that some who pray daily never meditate, which may suggest that their prayer serves a meditative function.

Although religions do not seem to be of great importance in the personal lives of most of the respondents, they still consider religions to be important for modern societies overall. The majority disagree with the statement that modern people have no need for religion. The significance of religious symbols and rituals in times of crisis is also highly valued. The students believe that religion, despite personal disinterest, has a place in public life and crisis management.

The respondents generally display high tolerance and acceptance towards the visibility of religion within school culture but are more reserved when it comes to religious practices within the school environment.

The wearing of headscarves by Muslim teachers in Switzerland is mainly prohibited due to a Federal Court ruling.⁵⁸ This prohibition is based on the categorisation of the headscarf as a major religious symbol, while only small religious symbols are permitted. The overwhelming majority of students surveyed oppose the idea that a Muslim teacher in a public school should not be allowed to wear a headscarf.

Additionally, a significant number of respondents support the introduction of a dedicated (partial) subject for religions in school and consider extracurricular activities, such as Bible courses or interreligious discussion groups, to enrich school life. These results highlight the general approval of the visibility of religion in public schools. The opinion that discussions about faith are irrelevant due to individual freedom of belief finds little support among the respondents.

The data on interreligious educational content, examined across various dimensions of religion, show a wide range of personal significance for the respondents. The aesthetic dimension is considered particularly relevant by 37.3 %, while 70 % of the respondents believe that interreligious learning helps in perceiving religions within cultures. Overall, the intellectual–ideological dimension is important for 31.4 % of the respondents, and another third value the affective dimension. These results can be partly explained by the sample size and the individual interest of the respondents in

58 Engi 2019, 209.

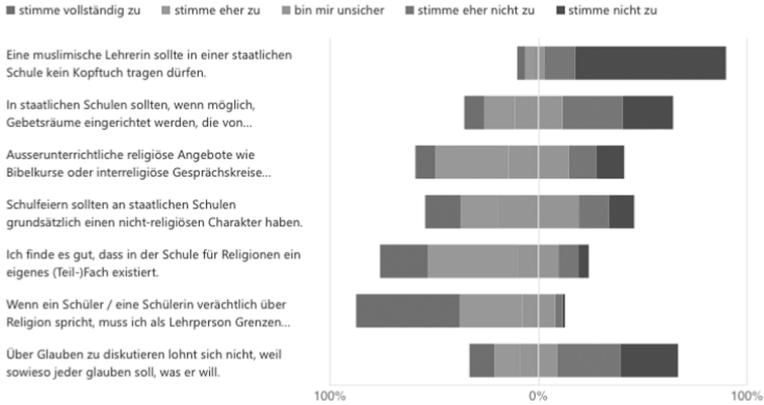


Figure 3: Presence of Religion and Tolerance in School Culture

interreligious topics. Overall, interreligious learning is viewed as a means to convey the significance of religion to individuals.

The ethical–social dimension is mentioned more cautiously by the respondents when it comes to aligning their own ethical orientation with religious concepts. 59 % indicated that this dimension is “barely” to “not at all” relevant in their lives, despite showing a wide range of responses in the initial survey. Both the institutional and the ritual–spiritual dimensions play a minimal role in the lives of prospective teachers. While the results for the institutional dimension are consistent with the first study, there is a noticeable difference regarding the ritual–spiritual dimension between the two samples.

A comparison of the students’ responses regarding their personal attitudes and their responses about educational content in classroom instruction shows that the data from the first survey and the current investigation are mostly consistent. The affective and ritual–spiritual dimensions demonstrate the least differences in relation to their own lifeworld perceptions compared to the evaluation of these dimensions concerning the educational content of interreligious learning. This suggests that there is a wide range of opinions and attitudes in both respects.

An analysis based on Karlo Meyer’s modes of religious understanding primarily highlights the elements of the bridge builder, the existential and subject-specific researcher, and the glocal actor. No-

tably, the modes of the existential and subject-specific researcher are almost equally represented.

The bridge builder mode is supported by about two-thirds of the respondents, who believe that interreligious learning can enable students to engage in interreligious dialogue. Learning through encounters is considered an important component of this educational approach⁵⁹, and scientific initiatives in Germany and Austria, such as those by the Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule Wien/Krems, emphasise promoting encounters between Muslim and Christian students.⁶⁰ These projects aim to prepare prospective teachers to facilitate interreligious learning processes in religious education.

Given the variety of responses and the underlying models of religious understanding, it is evident that interreligious learning is seen as a valuable tool for fostering dialogue and understanding among students from different religious backgrounds. The consistency in findings between the two studies highlights the importance and relevance of these dimensions in both personal and educational contexts.

A considerable number of respondents consider interreligious learning to be a pathway for understanding religions and religious traditions within cultures. It is recognised that culture and religion exist in a reciprocal relationship. A majority believes that interreligious learning processes can help students appreciate the importance of religion to certain individuals and develop an understanding of religious rituals. Rituals are considered foundational for communal processes and provide insights into the religious practices of various faiths. Participants also see value in exploring and understanding cultural–historical aspects through interreligious learning. Curricula emphasise the importance of engaging with rituals and customs.

Participants highlight that interreligious learning contributes to a better understanding of social and ethical issues, though the possibility of “religionising” these issues is critically examined.⁶¹ A high percentage of respondents feel confident rather than unsettled by unfamiliarity and are supportive of interreligious learning. Many

59 Schweitzer/Boschki 2017.

60 Garcia Sobreira-Majer et al. 2014.

61 Radtke 2012.

consider it important that interreligious learning emphasises both similarities and differences. This reflects a nuanced understanding of these learning processes and an acknowledgement of diversity in the interreligious dialogue.

Overall, the data suggest a robust endorsement of interreligious learning as a means to foster mutual respect, cultural understanding and a comprehensive approach to religious education. It also indicates that educators and students alike recognise the interconnectedness of cultural, religious and ethical dimensions in shaping societal perspectives.

In summary, the majority of respondents consider interreligious learning essential for imparting interreligious dialogue to students and providing insights into various religious traditions. They emphasise the importance of developing an understanding of religions and rituals. Respondents also support the idea of addressing both similarities and differences between religions in the classroom. Overall, students exhibit a positive attitude towards the contribution of interreligious learning to the acquisition of knowledge about sacred texts and the promotion of a scientific perspective on religions among students.

The findings clearly indicate that interreligious learning is not only a tool for fostering understanding of religious experiences and raising personal questions but also a means of perceiving the significance of religions in politics and promoting engagement in interreligious peace. Students view the foundational module of interreligious learning as a framework that enables them to actively commit to interreligious peace.

The study's authors emphasise that the approach of "glocally engaged thinking" within the Swiss context requires adaptation of the module to adequately consider the specific societal and cultural conditions in Switzerland. They propose that this approach can help students develop a conscious awareness of their influence on the interactions between religion and society and their own commitment to interreligious peace. The aim is for students to be empowered to influence these relationships actively, thereby contributing to the promotion of interreligious dialogue and peace.

This collective endorsement of interreligious learning highlights its potential to create a more understanding and inclusive educational environment, where future educators are well-equipped to

navigate and teach the complexities of religious diversity in our globalised, interconnected world.

3.3 Discussion of the Results

The study examined here analyses the attitudes and perspectives of prospective teachers towards interreligious learning. It reveals that although the majority of respondents recognise the importance of interreligious learning in the public context, they hardly perceive it as relevant to their own personal lives. There is a discrepancy between acknowledging the importance of religion in society and its personal relevance, leading to the question of whether authentic and effective interreligious learning is possible under these conditions.

The study highlights the significance of the “bridge builder” mode compared to the first investigation, which emphasised the “subject expert” mode. This shift is partly attributed to the change in focus from intellectual–ideological to aesthetic aspects in interreligious education. However, the boundaries of interreligious learning remain unclear: the study exposes the danger of “religionising” problems and “othering”. The study is criticised here for not sufficiently addressing the handling of confrontations and differences within various religions or whether what is foreign is viewed through one’s own lens.

The importance of the affective dimension of interreligious learning is also emphasised, as it can help convey a sense of the relevance of religion to people. The ethical–social dimension is deemed crucial for interreligious education content, yet its relevance to their own lives is only partially recognised by the respondents. This outcome raises questions about authenticity in teaching and the role model effect of the teacher.

Overall, the study provides significant insights into the attitudes and perspectives of prospective teachers towards interreligious learning. It offers points of departure for further research, which should delve into the influence of beliefs on the effectiveness of interreligious learning processes and the issue of confrontation and dealing with differences within various religions.

4. Conclusion

The study sheds light on students' self-perception regarding learning processes and their reception of learning content. In this respect, both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed. The results indicate that students' self-perception of learning processes and content is a complex issue, which does not always align with the findings of previous studies.

A significant point is the dominance of Christian theological and Muslim perspectives in academic positions and publications, while other religions receive little attention. This could point to the unconscious reproduction of structures of "othering", as the self appears in light of what is "foreign" within the framework of comparative theology in the mode of the existential researcher.

Despite these limitations, the study shows that Muslim theological and Islamic religious educational positions offer enormous potential for the development of teachers. The results emphasise the need for further research that includes the perspective of educators and provides a holistic view of interreligious learning.

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