

## The “Innsbruck Model” of Interreligious Teacher Education

The Austrian state recognises the social significance of religions and allows them to participate in the public sphere. In this context, it adopts a denominational approach to religious education in public schools, which is jointly shouldered by various religious communities and the state as a shared matter (*res mixtae*).<sup>1</sup> Officially recognised religious communities, as public corporations, have the right to provide denominational religious education to their members in public schools and are responsible for the denominational triad of students, content and the qualification of teachers (*ijazah*). In return, the state takes responsibility for the administration and funding of religious education classes for different denominations and religions.<sup>2</sup>

There are currently 16 recognised religious communities in Austria that have the right to provide their own religious education in public schools.<sup>3</sup> But so far, only eight of them offer religious education to their members: Catholic religious education, Islamic religious education, Protestant religious education, Orthodox religious education, Alevi religious education, Buddhist religious education, Israelite religious education and Free Church religious education.<sup>4</sup> Those pupils who do not have religious education or who do not want to take part in it—about 26 % of the pupils in public schools—take part in secular ethics classes as a substitute.<sup>5</sup>

This religious diversity poses financial, organisational, social and educational challenges and has led to numerous political and aca-

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1 Tsivolas 2014, 108.

2 BGBL. Nr. 190, 1949.

3 oesterreich.gv.at 2024.

4 Nimmervoll 2017.

5 derstandard.at 2023.

democratic debates about the future of religious education in Austria.<sup>6</sup> Against this background, the “Innsbruck Model” of interreligious teacher education, as presented below, was developed by Muslim and Catholic researchers and educators to prepare future teachers to engage in interreligious cooperation and teaching, both in terms of teaching their subjects and in the wider school environment.<sup>7</sup>

## The theoretical foundations of the Innsbruck Model of Interreligious Education

The Innsbruck Model of Interreligious Teacher Education acknowledges the context of inequalities and imbalances, even within religious communities and education, and emphasises their pervasive nature. It challenges teachers and educators to critically examine both their actions and attitudes against this background, as well as the language and classifications we use for their inclusive or exclusive impacts. It also encourages an attitude of contingency in the sense that something other than what is currently available or perceived is possible. In this context, it understands humanity and theology as follows:

Being human in relation to God and the common trait of “being human” unites people regardless of religious affiliations. In this context, questions of human existence, dignity, and reverence for God are intertwined, forming key concepts for life and action. When examining human experiences, it becomes clear that perceptions of humanity vary greatly. Initial reflections often reveal positive images of humanity, but deeper analysis highlights the complexities and ambivalence of human existence. These images are influenced by religious, ideological, historical, and cultural contexts, and are therefore never absolute.<sup>8</sup>

In interreligious didactics, anthropological foundations are shaped by religious perspectives and always relate to God at their core. This does not negate secular concepts such as human rights, which are universally recognised and concern both religious and

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6 Tuna 2021.

7 Sejdini et al. 2017 / Sejdini et al. 2020.

8 Sejdini et al. 2017 / Sejdini et al. 2020. Transl.

non-religious people. Theological anthropology according to the Innsbruck model reconciles anthropological foundations with human rights and the religious understandings of Muslim and Christian traditions by integrating human rights into religious teachings as a basis for interreligious cooperation.

From a human rights, Islamic and Catholic theological–anthropological perspective, the following aspects of humanity are fundamental<sup>9</sup>:

*Createdness*, the concept of human and world origin, contrasts with a naturalistic understanding that emphasises human existence within a transcendent reality. Several religions link human existence to the recognition of a divine reality. This view suggests that humans are neither controlled by worldly things nor detached from the world. A creation-related perspective encourages gratitude for life and acknowledges a universal reality. Qur’anic and biblical texts describe creation by a single God, highlighting a fundamental connection between these religions. An evolutionary view can coexist with Christian and Muslim perspectives. Biblically, human beings are seen as living beings through God’s breath, which symbolises deep connectedness. In Islamic anthropology, createdness underscores humans’ dependence on God, with humans endowed with the Divine Spirit, which highlights their special role and responsibility within creation.

*Human dignity* is deeply connected to createdness and is seen as inviolable in both traditions. It is linked to human rights, which seek to legally protect this inherent dignity. Both the Qur’an and the Bible contain numerous references to the dignity of humankind, emphasising the equal dignity of men and women. This equal dignity calls for gender equality and justice in all spheres of life. It challenges societal norms and practices that undermine the inherent worth of any individual. By advocating human dignity, religious teachings provide a moral foundation from which to combat discrimination and injustice. Upholding human dignity in everyday interactions fosters a culture of respect and empathy, which is essential for peaceful coexistence.

*Freedom*, which is closely tied to human dignity, is a complex and often debated topic in theology. Both Islamic and Christian per-

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9 Sejdini et al. 2017, 49–82 / Sejdini et al. 2020.

spectives recognise the importance of freedom while acknowledging its limitations and the responsibilities that come with it. Human freedom is seen as a gift from God, allowing individuals to make choices and take responsibility for their actions. This freedom is not absolute but is exercised within the framework of divine law and moral principles. It involves a balance between personal autonomy and communal obligations. The exercise of freedom must consider the well-being of others and the common good. In this way, true freedom is realised through responsible and ethical living, aligned with divine will.

*Reason* is the ability to create relationships and understand the context of freedom and relatedness. It is essential for communication with God, fellow humans and the natural world. Both religious traditions value reason as a means to understand and fulfil one's responsibilities. Reason allows us to discern right from wrong and to make informed decisions. It facilitates dialogue and understanding across different beliefs and cultures. By cultivating reason, individuals can engage in critical thinking and reflective practices. This intellectual engagement enhances our capacity to contribute positively to society and to navigate complex moral and ethical issues.

*Responsibility*, as the appropriate use of freedom, represents the relationship of humans to themselves, others, creation and the Creator. It emphasises that freedom is not unrestricted but must be exercised with consideration for the well-being of all creation. According to the Islamic understanding, the responsibility of human beings is linked to fundamental anthropological conditions, such as free will, their status as God's deputy on earth, and the capacity for self-reflection. This responsibility includes caring for the environment and ensuring social justice. It calls for ethical behaviour and accountability in all actions. By embracing responsibility, individuals contribute to the common good and uphold the values of their faith traditions. This sense of duty fosters a more compassionate and just society.

In concrete contexts, realising human dignity, freedom and responsibility can be challenging, especially in situations of violence, oppression and deprivation. Religious communities play a significant role in addressing these challenges by advocating human rights and promoting interreligious cooperation. They provide moral guidance and support to those in need, fostering resilience

and hope. By working together, religious groups can create a united front against injustice and inequality. This collaboration enhances the impact of their efforts and amplifies their voices in the public sphere. Ultimately, it is through such collective action that the principles of dignity, freedom and responsibility can be effectively realised in our contemporary world.

Overall, theological anthropology provides a framework for understanding humanity that integrates religious perspectives with contemporary issues of human rights and dignity, fostering a holistic approach to interreligious education.

## The Innsbruck Model of Interreligious Teacher Education

Based on the theological anthropology understanding presented, the Innsbruck Model is built on a three-pillar strategy.<sup>10</sup>

*The first pillar* involves the combined training of prospective Catholic and Muslim religious education teachers through seminars and lectures held by both Catholic and Muslim educators mostly in a team-teaching format—only the introduction to each other’s religions (Islam/Christianity) is taught by an authentic Muslim/Christian educator on their own. These sessions provide genuine introductions to Islam and Christianity, ensuring that students gain a deep and authentic understanding of each religion’s beliefs, practices and traditions. This collaborative approach allows educators to present their religious perspectives in an authentic manner, fostering mutual respect and understanding among the students. Joint instruction in religious didactics covers effective teaching methodologies, helping future teachers develop the skills necessary to teach religion in diverse and inclusive classrooms. Additionally, the programme includes cooperative interreligious didactics on specific topics, enabling students to explore commonalities and differences between the faiths in a structured and supportive environment. Shared teaching and learning of academic research methods, such as conducting qualitative research within their own and other religious communities, is also a key component. This equips students with the

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<sup>10</sup> Kraml/Sejdini 2018a, 15–19.

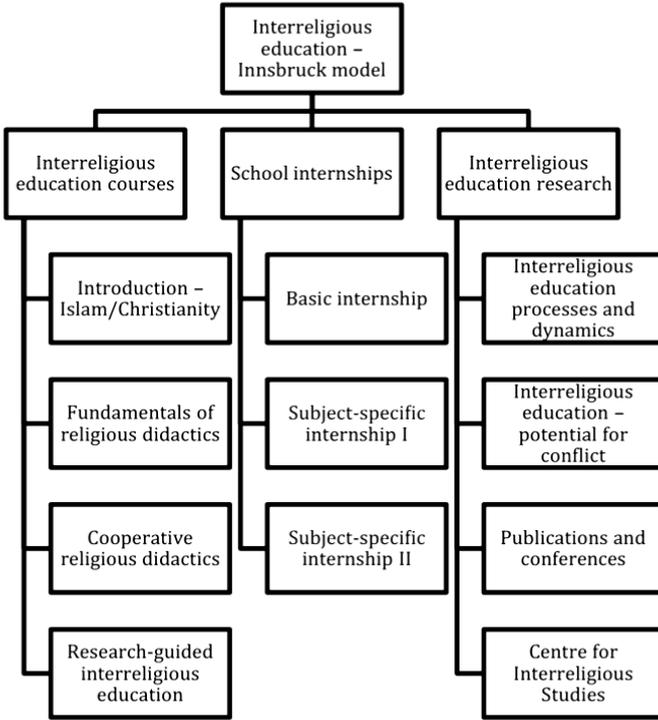


Figure 1: Elements and Structure of Interreligious Education in Innsbruck, Tuna 2021, 282.

necessary tools to engage in scholarly inquiry and contribute to the academic field of interreligious studies.

*The second pillar* aims to enhance interreligious learning experiences by having students participate in both joint interreligious basic internships and denomination-specific internships. During the basic internship, Muslim and Catholic students, under the guidance of a Catholic teacher, attend Catholic religious education classes in primary schools. Initially, students observe the class, gaining an insight into classroom dynamics, teaching methods and curriculum implementation. As the internship progresses, they are gradually given small teaching responsibilities by the supervising teacher. These responsibilities include preparing and teaching segments of the lesson, which allow students to develop their practical teaching

skills in a real-world setting. This hands-on experience is crucial for building their confidence and competence in teaching religious education. Additionally, students participate in a seminar conducted by a team of Muslim and Catholic educators, which is designed to support their interreligious learning experience during the internship and allow them to reflect on it. This seminar provides a platform for students to discuss their experiences, share insights and receive feedback from their peers and educators, which further enriches their understanding of and competence in interreligious education.

*The third pillar* involves research studies led by Muslim and Catholic scholars, aimed at enhancing the training of future religion teachers in religious pluralism and developing innovative concepts for pluralistic (inter)religious education in schools and teacher training programmes. This initiative included two funded research projects focused on evaluating the pluralistic interreligious training of future Muslim and Catholic religion teachers. Data was gathered through group and individual interviews with students, educators and supervising teachers. The findings are to be published in the series *Studies on Interreligious Education*<sup>11</sup> and presented at international conferences, such as the Forum for Sustainable Religious Education (n.d.).

The results of the empirical study have been published in two volumes. The first volume *Interreligious Educational Processes*<sup>12</sup> focuses on the experiences of students and teachers involved in individual courses. The research indicates that while the pluralistic (inter)religious approach in Innsbruck can be challenging and sometimes conflictual, it is highly beneficial for teacher training and the education of the students. These challenges prompt students to engage deeply with their own and others’ religious traditions and educational processes and methods, fostering personal and professional growth.<sup>13</sup> The second volume *Conflicts in Interreligious Education*<sup>14</sup> in turn examines the conflicts and their potential in interreligious education. The evaluation of empirical material in both school and university settings revealed three main areas of conflict. In schools,

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11 Kraml/Sejdini n.d.

12 Kraml/Sejdini 2018b. (German: Interreligiöse Bildungsprozesse)

13 *ibid.* / Tuna 2018.

14 Kraml et al. 2022 / Kraml et. al. 2020.

conflicts centred around (1) “religious group dynamics” involving asymmetric conditions and subgroup formation, (2) “themes and methodology focusing on subject matter and teaching methods”, and (3) “identity and denomination” addressing the appropriateness of religious encounters for identity formation.<sup>15</sup> In universities, conflicts involved (1) “planning, approaches and expectations” of courses, (2) “process, communication and group dynamics” among teachers and students, and (3) “conflicts about ‘ideal’ religious education and recognition” in relation to successful religious education and teacher roles.<sup>16</sup>

Building on the success of this cooperation, the Centre for Interreligious Studies was established and announced in 2019.<sup>17</sup> The centre aims to: a) provide a platform for (pluralistic) interreligious networking and research and b) promote the further development of multi-perspectival pluralistic and interreligious education concepts for various educational levels, including primary, secondary and higher education.

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15 Kraml et al. 2022, 89–145.

16 *ibid.*, 146–202.

17 See: Centre for Interreligious Studies n.d.

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