Pruchniewicz | Sarıkaya

# Interdisciplinary Contributions to Interreligious and Intercultural Teacher Education

## The Impact of IMPACCT

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Stephan Pruchniewicz | Yaşar Sarıkaya [Eds.]

# Interdisciplinary Contributions to Interreligious and Intercultural Teacher Education

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# Preface

The book "Interdisciplinary Contributions to Interreligious and Intercultural Teacher Education: The Impact of IMPACCT" is the result of the IMPACCT (International Mobility with Partners Abroad for Culturally Competent Teachers) project, which was carried out at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU) under the academic supervision of the Chair of Islamic Theology and its Didactics and funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) as part of the programme "Lehramt.International" from 2019 to 2024. Academics and students from the participating universities in Germany, Austria, Sweden, Turkey and Switzerland cooperated in this project over a period of five years within the framework of numerous scientific and educational events (guest lectureships, summer schools, conferences, workshops, etc.). They discussed from different perspectives aspects of the subject area of 'interreligious and intercultural learning' in schools and universities. This resulted in mutual and interdisciplinary synergies and an established academic network.

This anthology contains articles by renowned academics from the participating universities (Bursa, Marmara, Innsbruck, KPH Vienna/Krems, Stockholm, Fribourg and Giessen). In addition, there are short contributions that represent the experiences of the outgoing students who, as part of the IMPACCT project, spent one or two semesters at one of the participating universities.

As editors, we would like to thank all those involved, both academics and students, who have contributed to the creation of this book. Our sincere thanks go to the DAAD, which made this publication possible with funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Further thanks are due to Santander Universities and the Turkish-German Health Foundation for their financial support of the project. Our special thanks go to Dorothea Ermert, Dr Wiebke Nierste and Katharina Schäfer, who organised, coordinated and implemented the project. We would also like to thank Caroline Beierle for her editorial work on the manuscript and Verlag Karl Alber for their willingness to publish the book.

We hope that this anthology will make a constructive contribution to interreligious and intercultural learning.

Giessen, December 2024.

*Wiebke Nierste and Katharina Schäfer*

# International Mobility with Partners Abroad for Culturally Competent Teachers

## IMPACCT in Context

## Introduction

Internationalisation is omnipresent in higher education. It is often equated with incoming mobility (internationalisation at home) and the outgoing mobility of students and scholars (internationalisation abroad).[1] Internationalisation is generally viewed as having positive outcomes like the strengthening of foreign language competencies, personal growth, the acquisition of relevant soft skills, or the fostering of tolerance and openness, which both have a positive impact on society, especially in migrant societies. One of the most frequently quoted, yet continually revised, definitions of internationalisation comes from Jane Knight: "Internationalization at the national/sector/institutional level is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education."[2] Despite all the positive effects associated with internationalisation, it is under constant scrutiny. Scholars tend to evaluate internationalisation increasingly critically by reflecting on its negative side effects. On the one hand, scholars point out that internationalisation has, for example, political and ethical implications that have not been given sufficient attention in the recent definitional debate on the term.[3] On the other hand, scholars argue that the discussion about internationalisation lacks a critical perspective regarding the fact that periods of studying abroad, for instance in teacher education,

1 Hahn 2004, 13.
2 Knight 2003, 2, cited in Knight 2004, 11.
3 Buckner/Stein 2020.

can reinforce differences, othering, stereotypes and racism if not accompanied and reflected on appropriately.[4]

Internationalising teacher education certainly is one of the most important yet challenging cross-sectional tasks in higher education.[5] In line with general discourses on internationalisation, there are eight thematic areas that stand out in relation to the internationalisation of teacher education, among them crucial topics like the internationalisation of curricula, recognition of academic achievements abroad, the implementation of mobility windows or the measurement of competence growth.[6] Compared to other groups, student teachers, especially those who do not study foreign languages, are not very prone to mobility for a number of reasons.[7] In a survey conducted as part of the DAAD project "International University Benchmark" (BintHo) for the 2020/2021 academic year, more than 10,000 data records of student teachers were analysed in order to find out which difficulties and hurdles the students cited as obstacles to a study-related stay abroad. About 62 % of the students surveyed said they did not want to be separated from their social environment in Germany, followed by excessive costs (43 %), loss of time (42 %), too much organisational effort (36 %) and no advantage for their future career opportunities (31 %).[8] If we factor in historically grown and culturally anchored educational values and traditions, teacher education is naturally oriented towards the national school system and school practice, making international mobility not an obligatory part of studies. In general, internationalisation requires higher education and education policy to be rethought in order to open up the system to curriculum transformation, the development of sustainable collaborative teaching formats, systematic international exchange on teaching and learning, multiple languages of instruction, and, in the face of global developments, a newly defined set of competencies which pre- and in-service teachers should develop.

4 Massumi 2017.

5 One reasoned volume focusing on approaches to and strategies in internationalising teacher education is Brück-Hübner / Seifert / Müller 2024.

6 Cf. Falkenhagen / Grimm / Volkmann 2019, 1.

7 Cf. Ahlgrimm / Westphal / Wallert / Heck 2019 or Kercher / Schifferings 2019.

8 Cited in Bloch 2024, 68.

For a few years, several national and supra-national institutions have been focusing on enabling the internationalisation of teacher education through tailor-made funding programmes. One of those is the programme Lehramt.International, launched by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2019.[9] This DAAD funding programme is based on three fundamental principles. The objective of Module A is to provide support for model projects conducted by German higher education institutions with the intention of facilitating the internationalisation of teacher education. The funding provided to the participating universities offers them the chance to reinforce or extend their collaboration with foreign partner universities, as well as to further the internationalisation of teacher education at their home institutions. Module B offers targeted scholarships for internships in schools abroad to student teachers and graduates. Module C facilitates policy dialogues in the German federal states between political and academic stakeholders, with the objective of influencing the training of teachers at this level in a positive manner. Another component of Module C is public relations work in social media and on other channels for example the campaigne "Studieren weltweit"[10] The marketing strategy for the scholarship programmes especially will be further developed in this module.

The programme's structure allows the DAAD to respond at various levels to the findings of national and international surveys (*DAAD working paper, December 2021; PISA 2018, TALIS 2018; Education and Training Monitor, EU Commission, 2019*), which highlight the needs of teachers and students alike. This encompasses both the design of training programmes and the challenges encountered by students prior to them undertaking international placements. A review of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS 2018) indicates that only approximately 32 % of teachers feel adequately prepared to work with diverse student populations.[11] Conversely, a survey of student teachers conducted by the

9 This publication is made possible by the generous support of the DAAD and funds provided by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

10 Here you can find an example of one of our IMPACCT students: https://www.studieren-weltweit.de/welt-erleben/sophie-tuerkei/ (Last accessed 14 Mar 2025).

11 TALIS 2018, 99.

DAAD (BintHo) indicated that this cohort of students is the least likely to engage in international mobility because of the significant challenges and obstacles that they perceive. In addition to the question of financing such a stay, the possibility of extending the regular period of study was also identified as a significant challenge. Furthermore, the BintHo survey indicates that a relatively small proportion of student teachers with a non-linguistic major pursue a period of study abroad.[12] This very brief look at current studies shows that the internationalisation of teacher education is challenging, but extremely worthwhile considering current conditions in schools worldwide.

## The IMPACCT project (International Mobility with Partners Abroad for Culturally Competent Teachers)

Against the background of this complex overall situation, the IMPACCT project has focused on two fundamentally important aspects: firstly, the provision of target group specific counselling and information, and secondly, the support of students before, during and after their stay abroad in terms of their acquisition of intercultural skills.[13] This support was provided through specific intercultural learning opportunities and accompanying discussions.

In the initial funding phase of the IMPACCT model project (2019 to 2022), the primary objective was to engage one of the least mobile groups at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), namely, students pursuing a degree in primary education with the subject Islamic religion. The establishment of a broad-based network comprising six partner universities in Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey enabled a multi-layered view of Islam and Islamic Religious

12 DAAD 2023, 14.

13 Against the background of constantly changing concepts of culture, interculturality is not the only term that is used when it comes to analysing communication and interaction across cultures. The term interculturality has, for instance, been criticised by scholars for assuming that there are clearly definable cultures (for example, Moosmüller 2020). One other concept favoured by a number of scholars is transculturality, which understands cultures as interconnected and melted into one another (cf., for example, Erfurt 2021). See also Antor 2020.

Education (IRE). The variety of partner universities gave students a chance to select or their study abroad period whichever suited their individual requirements best. In order to provide counselling tailored to the specific needs of the target group, a comprehensive analysis of the stakeholder groups, student teachers and partner universities was conducted in order to prepare tailor-made information and counselling offers. These events served to present the project and its partner network as well as the courses offered by the respective universities. Additionally, they provided an opportunity for students to engage in dialogue with project staff and address any questions or concerns they may have had. Peer-to-peer counselling by a student assistant who had already spent a semester abroad with the project was identified as the most effective form of counselling during the course of the project. In order to prepare the students for their stay abroad and to enhance their understanding of the IMPACCT project, two intercultural learning opportunities were organised during the semester preceding their departure. These events comprised two intercultural training days and a didactic practical course designed to facilitate reflection on the students' experiences and the didactic/pedagogic competencies they had learned for their future work.[14] The objective was to cultivate a more nuanced interreligious and intercultural understanding and to foster sensitivity to the challenges of culturally diverse classrooms. To this end, an accompanying discussion was scheduled with the students during their period of study abroad, as well as a reflective final discussion a few weeks after their return. This also afforded the project staff an opportunity to gain an insight into the extent of change in the students' perspectives.

The second funding phase (2023–2024) saw the range of the target group expanded. In addition to students pursuing a degree in primary education with an emphasis on Islamic religion, students enrolled in secondary education programmes were included. The curriculum was expanded to encompass Protestant and Catholic RE, as well as Ethics. This reflected the growing awareness, evident during the initial funding phase, that in addition to students of Islamic religion, some students of Christian denominations and

14 For this see Ermert in this volume.

Ethics were also interested in participating in a project like IMPACCT. In the second funding phase, the students were also provided with comprehensive support before, during and after their stay, which was consistently identified as a key strength.

It should be noted that the objective of both funding phases was not solely to facilitate student mobility abroad; it also encompassed the provision of opportunities for internationalisation at home. Guest lectureships and virtual workshops were established with the objective of providing students at JLU with the opportunity to interact with lecturers from partner universities, thereby facilitating the decision-making process regarding the choice of a stay abroad. One virtual and one in-person summer school were held in the first and second funding phases,[15] providing an opportunity for students to engage in exchange on different models and principles of RE. All in all, the project's focus on interreligious dialogue and RE is unique in the total number of 36 funded projects in Module A.

## Conclusion

Five years of collaboration in the IMPACCT project have shown clearly how important it is to facilitate international cooperation between all the stakeholder groups involved. In the course of the cooperation, it quickly became apparent that, in addition to interreligious dialogue, inner Islamic dialogue needs to be promoted constantly. This anthology is above all a testament to the committed discussions of the project partners that resulted from the first and second funding phases regarding the development in focus from the Islamic to the interreligious perspective on RE.[16]

This article ends with five lessons learned out of five years of international project activity within IMPACCT. All the lessons learned

15 On the virtual summer school, see Nierste 2024.

16 Around the same time as this anthology was written, the project team acquired the third grant for IMPACCT (2025–2029). The next developmental step is to interconnect the focus topic of interreligious dialogue with the topics peace, justice and inclusive societies based on the synergies with the European University Alliance EUPeace: European University for Peace, Justice, and Inclusive Societies. https://www.eupeace.eu

are formulated in general terms, as they can be applied beyond the internationalisation of teacher education as well.

1) Internationalisation needs multiprofessional teams consisting of academics and higher education professionals well-versed in facilitating and promoting internationalisation.
2) Successful internationalisation highly depends on detailed knowledge of the target group and target group-oriented communication channels.
3) Against the background of cultural differences in international project work, it is essential to exchange information intensively about common objectives, expectations as well as roles and responsibilities. 4) Stable personal relationships built on trust and reliability, which need time to develop, are a prerequisite for internationalisation.
5) Internationalisation requires institutional commitment as it is a task that encompasses entire institutions.

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*Dorothea Ermert*

# Experiences with and Reflections about an Intercultural Practical Course[1]

## The very beginning …

Within the framework of IMPACCT, a new type of course had to be developed to fulfil the requirements of the project with regard to internationalisation as well as intercultural and interreligious issues. Therefore, the author conceived a course named "The Intercultural Dimension in the Didactics of Islamic Religious Education", which she offered from 2020–2022. In terms of the participants in this first phase, predominantly students from the chair of Islamic Theology and its Didactics took part, whereas somewhat later a few students of ethics participated as well. At that time, all of the students were strongly motivated and eager to have their international mobility stay at one of our partner universities, with participation in the practical course being compulsory for them. Due to the Covid pandemic and its travel restrictions, there were no incoming students from our partner universities. Our own (outgoing) students could not realise their mobility stay either, except for one student, who managed to go to Fribourg University in Switzerland for a couple of months.

In those years, the language used in the course was German, as is usual with the majority of lectures and seminars at Justus Liebig University Giessen. The goals of the course were concretely defined as following:

- Prepare the outgoing students for their mobility stay.
- Sensitise them with regard to intercultural and interreligious challenges during their mobility stay.

1 This is kind of course, called *Übung* in German, at Justus Liebig University Giessen has a mainly practical approach to give students a sense of the conditions and challenges in their future professional lives.

- Widen the horizons of all participating[2] students with regard to the conditions in other countries.
- Prepare all the students with regard to the "heterogeneous classroom", which they will probably work in during their teaching careers.
- Sensitise them with regard to intercultural and interreligious challenges which might occur during their teaching practice.

The practical course was offered within the framework of *Module 3: Islamic Religious Education and Teaching Methodology*. In order to implement the overarching goals of the practical course's curriculum, it was essential to consider the two fields of competencies and content. The following examples elucidate the competencies intended to be fostered through the practical course:

The students

- can explain and define the content and competency goals of Islamic religious education within the context of the general educational goals of primary schools.
- can develop and plan religious learning processes for religious education in schools, taking into account the day-to-day realities of children, their upbringing and (developmental) psychological learning prerequisites, and their theological expertise.
- are able to analyse and evaluate media, materials and methods in Islamic religious education from a teaching perspective.
- know the curricula of Islamic religious education in primary schools, can assess them and have planning strategies for their implementation.
- know non-school settings in Islamic religious education and religious learning and can understand their significance for Islamic religious education at school.

2 From the 2nd semester of the project onwards, non-IMPACCT students from the chair were also accepted to take part in the practical course. In this way, they were provided with a profound insight into the required topics and issues, which enabled them to experience a kind of "mobility at home" and have "a look outside the box".

– can identify and develop subject-based and general teaching perspectives for interdisciplinary lessons (religious education project work in schools).[3]

Beyond the course being part of module 3, also the following competency of *Module 2, Religious Practice Past and Present* was considered essential in order to provide the students with a deeper insight into and understanding of intercultural and interreligious issues. "The students [...] can understand, reflect on and describe the interaction between Islamic and European culture and religions."[4]

Regarding the content of module 3, the following aspects served as guidelines for conceiving the practical course:

– intercultural, interdenominational and interreligious dimensions of Islamic religious teaching and religious education
– significance of upbringing and the (developmental) psychological learning prerequisites of children for learning Islamic religion at school
– pedagogical and theological rationale for Islamic religious education in ideologically neutral schools
– media, materials and methods of Islamic religious teaching
– non-school settings for Islamic religious education and religious learning
– comparison of religious education concepts, learning concepts and teaching methodology[5]

To complete the range, again some aspects of module 2 contributed to the requirements of the practical course, such as:

– the main aspects of Islamic history from its beginnings to Islam in contemporary Europe
– Muslim religious practice
– Muslim festivals and Muslim lifestyle and food[6]

3 In this article, the author uses an internal translation of the practical course's curriculum into English. For the original see: https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/institute/islamische-theologie/studium-und-lehre/modulbeschreibung-islamische-theologie_l1-vor-22-03-2012.pdf/view L1 – Appendix 2 – Islamic Religion Modules As amended by Decision No. 4/10 July 2013.

4 ibid.

5 ibid.

6 Internal translation of the practical course's curriculum into English.

Based on the above-mentioned prerequisites, the content of the practical course consisted of the following three parts:

*1. Intercultural aspects in Islam*

This part included an overview about the historical and theological backgrounds like *Muslim traces—past and present—in European history* as well as the main Islamic sources (*Qur'an, Hadeeth*) and examples from the Prophet's biography.

*2. Insight into Muslim life and Islamic Education in the partner countries of the IMPACCT project*

Besides some basic knowledge about Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey, the situation and living conditions of Muslims in those countries were of core interest. Aspects like:

- the position of Muslims in society (official, experienced/felt …), according to keywords like
- *recognised/respected/tolerated/discriminated/oppressed…*,
- participation in society and social commitment,
- structures within the Muslim community/communities like *self-organisation, prayer*
- *opportunities, youth work,* etc.

served as an occasion for and orientation in lively discussions between the students.

Specific questions were assumed to be useful in honing the focus on religious education in the partner countries, such as:

- What model of religious education is being implemented in the partner countries
- (denominational, non-denominational …)?
- Who offers these lessons?
- Where do the teachers come from (from the country itself, "imported teachers" from abroad)?
- How are teachers trained?
- What lesson content is taught?
- What teaching materials are available in the partner countries?

*3. Didactic approach*

This part of the course aimed to dive deeper into the intercultural and interreligious aspects of Islamic religious education. For this

purpose, it was essential to reflect on the subject's curricula according to the different school types. The students were given an array of schoolbooks and media, developed in Germany or in some of the partner countries, to analysed according to general didactic as well as intercultural and interreligious criteria. Thus, the group was prepared to compare and discuss their different pedagogical and didactic concepts. The planning of lessons completed the other fields and enabled the students to reflect deeply, consider arguments and develop visions of how to create attractive and interesting lessons with a special focus on intercultural and interreligious issues. An integral part of all of these was reflecting on one's own religious background, the grade of one's religiosity, the importance of religion for one's own lifestyle, traditions, country of one's family's origin, etc.

## The change …

From 2023 to 2024 the IMPACCT project continued by widening the range of students. For this reason, the practical course's frame and content had to be adapted to the new conditions. Therefore, it was named "The Intercultural Dimension in the Didactics of Religious Education and Ethics Instruction". Interestingly, in this phase most of the participants were students of Ethics and Protestant/Catholic theology, whereas only a few students of Islamic Theology attended the course. A real turning point was the participation of incoming students.[7] Now, English and, in cases of necessity, Turkish were added to German as the (unofficial) languages used in the course to enable the students to follow the lessons.

7 Some of the incoming students were IMPACCT students, some of them Erasmus students who in the same manner were obliged to attend the intercultural course. All of these students came from Turkish universities.

## Goals and content

The rough structure of the course remained in parts as before to guarantee the continuity of the core aspects. Nevertheless, it also had to be widened through the Christian and the non-religious perspectives to provide all of the students with other perspectives and to facilitate deep exchange of thoughts and experiences between them. For this reason, the topic "Intercultural Aspects of Christianity and Ethics" was added. In the same manner, the analysis of teaching materials and media now included not only the materials of Islamic religious education, but also of Catholic religious education, Protestant religious education and ethics instruction. Two virtual workshops, held by Prof. Dr Jenny Berglund from Stockholm University in 2023[8] and by Prof. Dr Bülent Senay from Bursa University in 2024[9], contributed to the students being able to "look outside the box" and enriched the course through the lively insights they offered into both the Swedish and Turkish perspectives.

## Feedback and Challenges

Throughout both phases of the project, all the students appreciated gaining new perspectives and widening their horizons. They liked getting insights into the other countries with their different cultures, religions and world views. It became obvious that reflecting on the conditions of religious and non-religious lifestyles in the respective countries in comparison with the situation and one's own lifestyle in Germany brought forth new insights regarding the well-known environment of the students. This deeper reflection enabled the students to hone their views and critical thinking as well as to discuss issues in more varied ways. The above-mentioned virtual workshops also contributed to these effects and were highly appreciated, which became obvious through the very positive feedback.

Mentioning challenges means having a look at the whole range of circumstances, which may prepare the group to improve and opti-

8 Title: "Basic Anthropological Considerations for Intercultural and Interreligious work".

9 Title: "Religious diversity, Islam and Non-Muslims in Turkey".

mise further proceedings. Due to the wide range of prerequisites[10], students were very heterogeneous in terms of their prior knowledge about religions and historical developments. For incoming students from Turkey, German as a study language was difficult to master. When they were seated nearby a Turkish-speaking student (buddy), things became much easier for them. Teaching itself became a challenge when switching between the languages was required to a larger extent. Nevertheless, this argument can be weakened slightly due to recent technical developments. Thanks to AI, translating tasks, texts and presentations became much easier than before and made it easier to provide the incoming students with the study materials they needed. Nevertheless, spoken German still remains a challenge for incoming students and does not seem to be something they can master easily.

## Conclusion

Experience shows that from semester to semester and from year to year, the opportunity for intercultural and interreligious exchange in an international environment became increasingly attractive to students. Opening the course to students of other subjects contributed to widening their horizons and to their gaining deep insights into other people's living conditions. Religion and culture were not treated as theoretical concepts but came alive through the students sharing experiences and knowledge. Transferring them into school and teaching practice was and is both a challenge and a promise for the future.

10 Students being at quite differing phases of their studies.

*Jenny Berglund*

# The Teaching of Islam in Sweden

Religious systems depend on education for their upkeep, survival and preservation. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that religious instruction and education form the foundations of all major religions. The methods used by followers of a dominating majority religion to pass down their religious traditions to future generations are different from those used by adherents of a minority faith. Although formal education is also required for a religion's long-term survival, the majority religion has the effect of "marinating" the majority society in some ways.[1] As a result, certain religious values and narratives are "transmitted" through state institutions, official media, traditions, cultural expressions and other means. However, minorities have much fewer opportunities to pass on their religion to future generations, and as a result, Muslim minorities frequently rely on networks and institutions outside the state to maintain the administration and survival of their religious communities, as they cannot rely on governmental institutions to do so. While some Muslim children, teenagers and even adults attend privately operated after-school or weekend Islamic lessons, others attend private schools or receive instruction from parents or other family members at home. In the past ten years, there have been more, frequently international, online teaching opportunities, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the meantime, Islamic education has become a source of concern for most European governments due to the increased vigilance towards Islamism and Muslims since September 11, 2001, and the Islamist terror attacks in European cities. This is because Islamic education must be monitored and controlled to prevent the rise of radical Islam, while still upholding the constitutional right to re-

1 Berglund 2022, 111.

ligious freedom of minorities.[2] This goal of striking a balance between providing for and controlling religious minorities explains why Islamic religious education (IRE) has become a topic of intense public debate; people are concerned that their government is either intervening too little or too much when it comes to shaping the spiritual beliefs of private citizens.

Policies have varied depending on national ideologies of secularism, multiculturalism and political culture.[3] State strategies have ranged from sponsoring Islamic education in state schools to providing state funding for religious schools, organising state-supervised training of teachers of Islam, and monitoring curricula and teaching practices in Muslim private schools.

Despite having been heavily influenced by Lutheran Christianity, today Sweden is regarded as one of the world's most secular nations. Sweden is a universalist welfare state that grants all citizens social and human rights, while maintaining the authority to meddle in their personal affairs in order to maintain social cohesion, equality and safety. High standards for the "integration" of minority groups are included in this, along with concessions to the majority's views on religion and secularism.[4] In this chapter, I will present and discuss in what way a highly secular welfare state, such as Sweden's, organises Islamic education in various forms.

## Christianity and Secularism

Sweden's population stands at approximately ten million. Prior to 2000, the Evangelical Lutheran Church was Sweden's official state church. Today, however, its status is also that of a people's church (*folkkyrka*), meaning that it is no longer directly tied to the Swedish state. Membership in the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan) has decreased to around 60 % of the Swedish population in recent decades[5], and sociological surveys affirm Sweden's status as one of the world's most secular countries; according to the Pew Research

2 Gent/Franken 2021 / Berglund 2015.
3 Taylor 1998 / Modood 2007 / Mannitz 2004 / Berglund 2015.
4 Gullestad 2002.
5 Willander 2019.

Center in 2018, up to 72 % of Swedish respondents believe religion has no influence on their lives. Only about 15 % of people reply in the affirmative to the question, "Do you believe in a personal God?" On a typical Sunday, about 1 % of the population attends a Church of Sweden service. This is a low score, but statistical evidence suggests that the very low level of church attendance has been fairly consistent for as long as there have been numbers to compare. When church attendance in Sweden started to be registered in 1927, attendance was around 5 %.[6]

Sweden has more than 200 years of history as a neutral state, and non-alignment has long been part of the Swedish self-image, which is evident in its attempt to define its role as a 'humanitarian superpower' but also in its feminist foreign policy. As Simons and Manoilo noted in 2019, cracks had been visible for years in the domestic consensus as the contradictions of the humanitarian super-brand and feminist foreign policy became more salient.[7] Today, Sweden has not only entered NATO, but it has also radically changed its migration policy, which was once a strong ideology of international solidarity and hospitality, as demonstrated during the 2015–16 refugee crisis, when many other countries closed their borders. In the 2014 election, the antiimmigrant and especially anti-Islam 'Sweden Democrats' political party received 13 % of the vote in the election, and in 2022 they gained 20 % of the vote, becoming the second largest party. Islamophobia and hate crimes are on the rise in Swedish society, and, in 2023, the polarisation of society entered a new level with the discussions on the burning of the Qur'an in front of mosques and Muslimmajority embassies. Muslims are often depicted in a negative light, and Muslim immigrants are regularly problematised in public debate, often being described as a minority that is resistant to democracy and secularisation and opposed to the established separation of church and state.

6 Gustafsson 2001 / Willander 2019.

7 Simons / Manoilo 2019.

## Muslims in Sweden

There are no reliable statistics for the number of Muslims in Sweden, only various estimates. According to those from 2016, Sweden's Muslims accounted for 8 % of the total population. The Pew Research Center estimates that 810,000 people identify themselves as Muslim in some way and that the country will have the largest Muslim population in Europe by 2050, ranging from 11 to 30 percent of the population depending on the migration rate. Muslim immigration to Sweden started with labour migration from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia in the 1960s. Since the 1980s, the majority of Muslims who have moved to Sweden have either been refugees or relatives of people who already live there.[8] In 2021, Thurfjell and Willander's large-scale quantitative study compared Swedes with Muslim family backgrounds to Sweden's secular, post-Lutheran dominant culture. Contrary to expectations, the Christian respondents show more affinity with their religious heritage than Muslims, and there is a noticeable fusion between the groups. While both groups largely distance themselves from their own religious heritage, Muslims do so in a more definite way, with Muslims upholding more secular values and identities than Christians. Thurfjell and Willander[9] conclude that, on the basis of their findings about Muslims in Sweden, equating religious familial heritage with religious identity is hasty. Nonetheless, although Sweden's Muslim population is to a large extent secular, the majority population perceives Muslims as more religious and the debate about Islam is coloured by an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy, with a tendency to support the idea that a 'normal' religion is one that is either protestant or invisible. This also affects religious education, both inside and outside the public school system.

8 Sorgenfrei 2018.

9 Thurfjell/Willander 2021.

## Religious education in state schools

In Sweden, the vast majority of Muslim children pass through the state school system. Indeed, in Sweden, 27 % of all pupils in school have an immigrant background[10], although as yet there are no available statistics on how many of them are Muslim.

Christianity was the main religious subject in all types of schooling for centuries after the Middle Ages, in a Lutheran evangelical form after the Reformation, and, while gradually pushed aside by other subjects and general secularisation, it was still taught as a denominational subject until recent times. It is worth noting that the Swedish approach to religious education differs from that in most other European countries. France, for example, is characterised by a strict secularist approach, banning religious symbols in schools, having no separate school subject for religion, and teaching the history of religion within the history syllabus. Central and East European countries have generally retained the teaching of religion and invited different religious communities into schools to conduct faith education for different groups of children.[11] The Swedish but also current Scandinavian and wider Nordic model, on the other hand, provides the teaching of religion in a non-denominational way, privileging Christianity to different degrees both quantitatively and qualitatively, including acknowledging the Christian holidays of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.[12]

Sweden has a long history of non-denominational integrative religious education. A school reform in 1962 required the subject of Christianity to maintain an 'objective' profile with regard to questions of faith[13], and the subject's name was changed from Christianity to Knowledge About Religion in 1969, which is a direct translation of the Swedish word *religionskunskap*. This name change symbolised the transition from a denominational to a more non-denominational school subject that prioritises teaching *about* religion, including various non-Christian religions, from a Study of Religions perspective. Since 1996, non-denominational religious edu-

10 Skolverket 2022/2023.

11 Mannitz 2014 / Gent/Franken 2021.

12 Berglund/Gilliam/Selimovic 2023.

13 Skogar 2000.

cation (RE) has been an obligatory school subject taught in all state-funded schools (i.e. also in all independent schools, including the denominational ones) from primary to upper secondary level. The emphasis in primary school is on the local community and storytelling, whereas at higher levels it is on key ideas within what are called "the world religions" (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, according to the syllabus) as well as on secular world views, or 'outlooks on life' as they are called in the English-language documentation from the National Agency for Schools.[14] In upper secondary school, one RE course is obligatory. The first sentences in the syllabus clearly show its departure point:

> The subject of religion has its scientific roots primarily in the academic discipline of religious studies, and is by its nature interdisciplinary. It deals with how religions and outlooks on life are expressed in words and action, and how people formulate and relate to ethical and existential issues.[15]

The use of the term "non-denominational" (the term used in the official translation to English) is meant to imply that education is to be presented in such a way in the Swedish school system that no particular world view is prioritised and that pupils from all cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds should feel comfortable.[16] This neutrality, however, does not apply to the realm of what is described as society's "fundamental values", the mediation of which the national curriculum considers a primary task of Sweden's educational system.[17] Even though all school subjects are supposed to be non-denominational, they can be understood to be "marinated in Lutheran Protestantism"—not only the country's factual history, but also in terms of how people think and talk about religion in society, how religion is taught and holidays are celebrated in schools, how institutions are built and who receives state subsidies.[18]

Although one might expect the neutral religious studies approach to the teaching of religion in Sweden to result in a more neutral pre-

14 Skolverket 2011.
15 Skolverket 2022.
16 Skolverket 2018, 5.
17 ibid.
18 Berglund 2023.

sentation of Islam, this does not seem to be the case. Two studies of textbooks about Islam for non-denominational religious education in Swedish schools have shown that throughout history, the choice of words and events used to describe Islam has often been negative. Although the content is not specifically wrong, this reiterated pattern creates a tedious picture of Islam as a whole.[19] Berglund's studies on the subject demonstrate that Swedish textbooks follow the format of "the man, the book, the faith",[20] a type of presentation that is prone to cause problems since it indicates to students that the Qur'an is the same type of text and serves the same purpose as the Bible in Christian traditions. Both are, of course, books and can thus be compared as such; they have a common story and gallery of characters, but what is important to remember is that their function in theology differs. Another problem that is not specifically related to Islam but to all religions presented in Swedish textbooks is that people who represent a religion in textbooks are often 'maximalists': in other words, those who are most devout and most self-assured about a specific tradition. This could have two negative consequences: (1) students belonging to a specific religion may believe they are not good adherents because they do not live as the maximalist representative depicts, and (2) students not belonging to the religious tradition depicted may believe that all its adherents live according to the maximalist representation.[21]

Despite the secular (not favouring any specific religion or world view) but not secularistic (favouring a world view in which religion should be kept in the private sphere) outlook of the Swedish school system, studies have shown that religion is frequently associated with a historical time when people did not know better—that religion may have played an important role in the past, but modern people do not need it anymore. Karin Kittellmann Flensner[22] demonstrates that taking a nonreligious and atheistic stance is often considered a neutral and normal attitude towards religion and that being religious is frequently presented as problematic for a modern, rational and independently thinking human being. Apart from this

19 Otterbeck 2004 / Härenstam 1993.

20 Berglund 2014.

21 Berglund 2020 / Berglund 2021.

22 Kittelmann-Flensner 2016.

dominant discourse, which can be understood as a specific form of normativity, some students and teachers in Kittelmann Flensner's study talked about Sweden as a Christian country with reference not to beliefs but to Swedish traditions and history, frequently using them to define a 'we' in relation to 'the others', who were frequently religious people in general and Muslims in particular.[23] An interview study from Sweden also shows that pupils who receive Islamic supplementary education—often consisting of memorising passages of the Qur'an—have been the target of negative comments which express that such education is at odds with modern, rational Swedish society.[24] Although it was common for Swedish pupils to have to memorise not only poems, hymns and Bible passages but also features such as the periodic table and Sweden's rivers and lakes (which are numerous) 50 years ago, this is no longer the case. Instead, the school system's discourse on memorisation is very negative and frequently referred to as 'old fashioned' in contrast to the prevailing educational ideal in Sweden—and the West more broadly—of interactive learning. Muslim pupils thus face an underlying presumption of negative outcomes if they discuss the knowledge and skills gained in their supplementary education, with teachers and friends labelling them as 'too religious'.[25]

## Islamic schools

In Sweden, only 1 % of all pupils attend a faith-based school. Sweden's first state-funded Islamic school (a state-funded, independent, faith-based school) opened in Malmö in 1993. At most, there were eleven schools that were classified as Islamic by the National Agency of Education. Today, there is only one left. Like other independent schools in Sweden, the Islamic schools are / were 100 % funded by the state. No new Muslim schools have been founded since 2004.[26] One of the reasons these Islamic schools were established in Sweden in the early 1990s is that the Education Act was amended in

23 Kittelmann-Flensner 2016.
24 Berglund 2017 / Berglund 2018.
25 Berglund 2017.
26 Henrekson 2023.

1992 to make it easier to establish independent schools. Although independent schools (including faith-based schools) must have the same basic goals as municipal schools, an independent school is allowed to have a profile or mission that distinguishes it from a municipal school, including a specific school ethos and extracurricular subjects (such as Islamic religious education [IRE] in Islamic schools) that are incorporated into the weekly schedule. Denominational school subjects or gatherings can consequently be added to the weekly schedule, but these subjects cannot be mandatory. The goals outlined in the national curriculum (see above) must be met in faith-based independent schools, meaning that non-denominational religious education is taught as a mandatory school subject in Swedish Islamic faith schools, whereas Islamic religious education (IRE) must be optional. The profile of one Islamic school may be very different from that of another, and a distinction is frequently made between schools with 'strong' and 'weak' profiles, classifications which are based on the degree to which a specific religion influences the school's profile.[27]

Several studies show that parents' decision to let their children attend an Islamic school is not primarily influenced by the presence of IRE or even the Islamic school ethos. In her study, Mohme[28], for example, shows that parents often choose an Islamic school for their children primarily to provide them with a good academic education, one that, in the parents' opinion, is not possible to obtain in the suburb where they live, whose municipal school's standard is perceived to be low.[29] Other studies of school choice show that parents send their children to Muslim schools for reasons of security and well-being, that is, to avoid discrimination and achieve acceptance of difference.[30] Although RE or IRE may not be the most important factor in parents' decisions to send their children to Muslim schools, these schools do provide an environment in which children can be educated about Islam through textbooks based on a secularised study of religions approach, and also through denominational lessons in

27 Roth 2007 / Berglund 2010.

28 Mohme 2016.

29 ibid.

30 Bunar / Kallstenius 2006 / See also: Berglund 2010.

which Islam is the norm and the child learns about the 'good life' from an Islamic perspective.

## What does this mean for teacher education?

As mentioned above, RE in Swedish schools is not connected to any specific religion, so teachers need an education where they study different religions from a religious studies-based perspective. In Sweden, this kind of teacher training takes place at universities. The programme for the diploma required for RE in the Swedish school system thus includes courses from religious studies departments, where Islam is also taught and studied. This means that Islam is studied from a historical, sociological or anthropological point of view. Short introductory courses can be found in many universities, but at a number of universities it is possible (from BA to PhD level) to enrol in religious studies with a particular focus on Islam. Triggered by the present media attention on Islam, an increasing number of teachers have requested further education about Islam at universities. In order to respond to this request, Stockholm University, as well as some other universities, have established start-up courses on Islam, which are specifically directed at teachers and school personnel on both a basic and an advanced level. As part of the same request, students can also participate in exchange programmes (IMPACCT).

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*Mehmet H. Tuna*

# 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).[1] 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.[2]

There are currently 16 recognised religious communities in Austria that have the right to provide their own religious education in public schools.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5]

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

1 Tsivolas 2014, 108.
2 BGBL. Nr. 190, 1949.
3 oesterreich.gv.at 2024.
4 Nimmervoll 2017.
5 derstandard.at 2023.

demic debates about the future of religious education in Austria.[6] 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.[7]

## 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.[8]

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

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[9]:

*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-

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.[10]

*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

10 Kraml/Sejdini 2018a, 15–19.

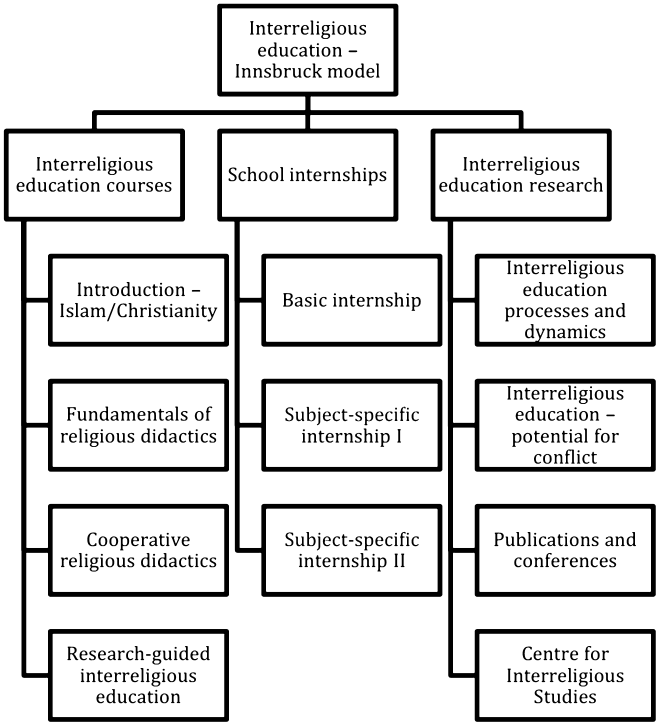


Figure 1: Elements and Structure of Interreligious Education in Innsbruck, Tuna 2021, 282.

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*[11] 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*[12] 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.[13] The second volume *Conflicts in Interreligious Education*[14] 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,

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.[15] 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.[16]

Building on the success of this cooperation, the Centre for Interreligious Studies was established and announced in 2019.[17] 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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*Stephan Pruchniewicz*

# Only human!

## Basic Anthropological Considerations for Intercultural and Interreligious Work

## 1. Introductory considerations

The reflections presented here on the basic anthropological conditions of interreligious and intercultural work are guided by the conviction that the discourses in these two fields have become stuck in recent years, particularly in their education-specific form. Above all, this applies to interreligious discourse and is based not least on the fact that the premises of this discourse have not been or rather are not sufficiently reflected in the field of education. With a clear focus on these basic anthropological conditions of interreligious dialogue, the following analysis aims to provide impetus for reorientation on the matter.

Below, considerations in these areas will be developed:

- Why does an interreligious discourse not work solely on the basis of the theologies involved?
- Basic anthropological assumptions or the question of individual identity.
- That, which remains foreign, as a resource for interreligious dialogue.
- Only human—more than a beginning.

## 2. Why an interreligious discourse does not work solely on the basis of the theologies involved.

In somewhat simplified terms, it can be said that the interreligious discourse in recent decades has been characterised by three aspects

or movements. This primarily involves interreligious exchange between the three major Abrahamic religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity—the latter in the diversity of its specific denominational forms.

The first step in interreligious dialogue or discourse was—and still is—an act of self-restraint that each of the three religions had to carry out: the renunciation of total condemnation of other religions—accompanied by the renunciation of the use of violence to enforce one's own religious ambitions against others in the cases of Christianity and Islam.

The second step consisted of recognising the dignity of other religions, accompanied by the desire to view other religions benevolently through the lens and with the means of their own theology.

The third step consisted, and still consists, of recognising the need to move beyond the traditional boundaries between religions and for them to enter into dialogue with each other on specific issues, accompanied by the admission that this requires better mutual knowledge—in other words, to take a look at other religions through the lens of their theology and traditions.

So far so good and so important. But, and this is what is meant here by the assumption that interreligious discourse has become stuck, what comes beyond the slowly exhausting reciprocal acquaintance? This is a question that should not be underestimated, especially with regard to interreligious learning. You cannot keep pupils busy for years in religious education lessons with the task of getting to know other religions—or their own. At some point, the question of why and the resulting consequences must be asked and answered. At this point, however, despite all the good will of those involved —and this is not in short supply—it begins to become difficult if one tries to solely argue theologically or solely searches for common theological traces or traditions. For example, it is not uninteresting from a Christian perspective that Jesus and Mary also appear in the Qur'an or that Jewish theologians also pursue the question of the Messiah against the background of Christian beliefs[1] or that Christianity has largely become aware of its Jewish roots. All this is important but not yet a dialogue. Here the efforts remain stuck in a quasi-self-referential recognition loop.

1 E.g. Korchide/von Stosch 2016.

Even more decisive, however, is and remains the question of truth, which is part of the enduring basic assumption of the religions mentioned. One's own believed truth is existential for each of the religions and thus, to borrow a term from Ludwig Wittgenstein, the rock on which the spade of interreligious endeavour bends.[2] In other words, if interreligious dialogue and interreligious education are not to come to a standstill at the points mentioned, then the perspectives of this project need to be broadened in two directions: on the one hand, in the direction of its common prerequisites, and on the other, in the direction of the areas in which interreligious work is to have an impact. To put it more simply: reorientation with regard to the individual and with regard to society.

## 3. Basic anthropological assumptions or the question of individual identity.

The only prerequisite that is indisputably common to all those involved in interreligious dialogue and interreligious learning—despite the banality of this statement—is the fact that they are human beings, a fact that seems so self-evident that it is usually simply overlooked or whose significance is not recognised. A look at the basic anthropological axioms associated with what it means to be human can open up a field in which encounters between people from different religious socialisations can initially take place unaffected by the traditions, norms, dogmas, etc. associated with them. This is by no means an attempt at simplification. The question of basic anthropological conditions also provokes decisions on which, in turn, the success or failure of interreligious encounters, dialogues and learning processes depends.

From the conglomerate of possible anthropologically relevant questions and clusters of questions, the aspect of the individual's ego identity should now be brought into focus for the context dealt with here. There is a very simple reason for this: the idea of an independent and sustainable religious identity is one of the standard objectives of religious education processes in catechetical and religious

2 PU 217: Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2003.

education contexts. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that interreligious encounters can either strengthen or, if viewed negatively, hinder the formation of this desired identity. In other words: How much religious identity is necessary to be able to participate in interreligious dialogue? How much identity change through interreligious encounters is possible, desirable or permissible? In addition, there is also the fundamental question of whether there is such a thing as religious identity at all and how it comes about.

We are indeed entering a broad field here, as is shown by the numerous attempts to answer Immanuel Kant's question "What is man?" since he etched it into the history of Western philosophy.

To get some orientation in this field, it can be helpful to turn the wheel of history back a few tens of thousands of years. An awareness of one's own identity and the importance that people attach to this fact can already be seen in the very early evidence of human culture. This is particularly evident in cave paintings, such as those found in the caves of Altamira in Spain or Lascaux in France. Powerful and enduringly mysterious, these paintings and drawings reveal a past that is otherwise largely hidden from us. In addition to the depictions of animals and people, the cave labyrinths also repeatedly contain the imprints of hands, which are perhaps perceived more in passing because of the other works of art. But isn't it precisely these imprints that bring us closest to the people, to the artists of the time? In these handprints or hand silhouettes, people have left behind something very individual and personal. Those who leave behind their "hand" leave behind something of themselves, imprint themselves in the place they mark with their handprint. Even if the motive for this action is not obvious, it perhaps reflects the desire to express oneself, to document a piece of one's individuality. For us humans today, this is constant proof that unmistakable identity is the central factor in our self-perception and self-expression.

Therefore, all considerations that attempt to get to the bottom of this individual identity formation and its forms of expression seem highly meaningful—for the religious and theological context, above all, in order to anthropologically locate the possibility of forming a religious identity.

Without being able to open up the entire philosophical discourse on the question of identity at this point, it seems important to draw

attention to one fact in order to outline the basic anthropological conditions for interreligious discourse in a targeted manner:

Western philosophy and theology, and therefore also the political societies of the Western world, generally view identity and its development as a process that is linear. In strong analogy to the temporal course of a human life, identity development also appears to be a gradual process that should be largely completed by adulthood. Our education systems are designed to follow this pattern, and, in many respects, this has proven to be the case. Metaphorically speaking, the development of an individual human identity seems to correspond most closely to the development of a tree: thought of as a dynamic forward movement from the roots, through the trunk and into the branches—until the tree is complete and has exhausted itself in its unfolding. Such a tree can easily be thought of as standing next to its peers until, as the proverb says, you can no longer see the wood for the trees.

The necessary objection at this point is to question whether identity development is so linear. Or to put it another way: isn't such a linear understanding of identity development a conceivably poor prerequisite for interreligious educational processes, at least for those that want to go beyond the above-mentioned mutual acquaintance? Doesn't a basic anthropological axiom conceived in this way counteract the aforementioned claim of being able to gain more freedom for interreligious discourse and interreligious learning through anthropology than is possible through theologies alone?

A possible alternative proposal at this point is based on the thoughts of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his longtime working partner Felix Guattari. In their short work "Rhizome. Introduction" from 1977[3], both attempt to break with the linear conception of thought. In doing so, they also break with the linear concept of identity development. In contrast, they emphasise the networked structure of thought and thus also characterise the human mode of existence. A person's biography, and therefore every moment of their existence in the past, present and future, is not characterised solely by a linear past, present and future, but by a wealth of lateral movements, connections and ramifications that

3 Deleuze/Guattari 1977.

make up and define the human being. Referring to flora, Deleuze and Guattari speak of a rhizome structure, with which they oppose, what they see as, the false tree structure. In their opinion, the rhizome model alone seems to correspond to the diversity of human life. The actual characteristics of human life are not purposefulness, structure and determination, but (and I quote)

networks of finite automata in which communication takes place between arbitrary neighbours and stems and channels do not exist from the outset; where all individuals are interchangeable and defined only by a momentary state, so that local operations coordinate and the general end result synchronizes independently of a central authority.[4]

Such an approach to human existence may initially be disconcerting, but it can shed light on the problem discussed here to the extent that the unfinished and blurred biographical aspects that are part of every person's identity, including religious identity, can remain. The grey areas, the ambiguities and the ongoing search movements can be preserved in their meaning and dignity through the idea of a rhizome system, which is precisely a system without systematics, and thus also everything that is present in religious (but possibly also non-religious) aspects, ideas and experiences.

In a nutshell, Deleuze and Guattari present a basic anthropological pattern that is highly adaptable to new experiences and challenges. The formation of the ego in the process of identity development is nothing more, but also nothing less, than maintaining the dynamics of the system: stability through change or, in their words, "steadfast mobility".[5]

Such an image of a human, or such an image that a human has of himself, makes fundamental openness to other things plausible—openness that can act without fear because, to return to the actual question, it can understand its own religiosity as a dynamic and not a static event. In this sense, the ideas and demands of other religions or even those of a possibly secular society as a whole can be met with a steadfast identity, the stability of which lies precisely in its incompleteness and openness to events.

4 Deleuze/Guattari 1977, 28. Transl. Caroline Beierle.

5 Simon-Winter 2020.

For the context discussed here, this raises an exciting question: How can we use interreligious or intercultural teaching and learning in the context of school education processes to provide types of impetus in such a way that they are accessible to pupils on the basis of this anthropology? This means assuming that it is not what religion the pupils are, i.e. Muslim, Jewish, Christian, etc., that is decisive but that they are human beings.

In other words, on the basis of the anthropological considerations outlined above, the preceding considerations are to be understood as a plea for a strong biography-oriented approach to interreligious learning. Such an approach alone seems feasible in view of the diverse manifestations of the religiousness and non-religiousness in classrooms.

## 4. That which remains foreign, as a resource for interreligious dialogue

The explanations so far could give rise to the suspicion that the attempt to approach the phenomenon of interreligious education with an affinity for anthropology is ultimately an avoidance strategy by simply claiming that human beings are different from what has been previously thought and that this would solve the central problems. This is not the case at all. Rather, a rhizomically conceived epistemological capacity of human beings allows a fear-free encounter with all those things that cannot be identified as part of oneself at the moment of the encounter. In fact, this approach makes it easy to protect the other that is encountered in its dignity as a permanent other. Encounters with others and with the other can dynamize me in my religious humanity. They can touch me and question me. They can confuse and irritate me. They can entice me and they can repel me—but they do not force me to make a decision as the only possible reaction, and certainly not to protect my identity. Nor do I need to dissolve the other in my own religious convictions or my own theology in a pleasing or well-meaning way. In both cases, I rob this encounter of what is crucial: the movement it triggers in me.

This is therefore a point that can be spelled out anthropologically, philosophically and theologically in equal measure. Anthropologically, human life cannot be thought of without the idea of encoun-

ters; philosophically—in an inadmissible reduction—an encounter can always be understood as an one with a stranger; theologically, human encounters can always be thought of in terms of an initial encounter with God. In all cases, the encounter creates a relationship of tension that cannot be resolved. To put it somewhat bluntly, despite all the possible advantages that the encounter has for me as a human being, this advantageousness can only remain if the others / the other is preserved in their / its lasting otherness, in their / its lasting strangeness.

This idea, which Emmanuel Lévinas in particular made strong in his philosophy[6] by elevating the absolute ethical responsibility of human beings for others to the level of the only possible life and survival strategy, is one of the crucial anthropological prerequisites for interreligious discourse and interreligious learning. This deepest respect for other people and their basic religious convictions is not based on my theology—even if it seems so easy as a Christian to justify everything with the required love for thy neighbour—but is a basic axiom of my humanity. I am referred to the other in a way that leaves no way out and that precedes every religious and political motivation or negation. If a person wants to be human, they are referred to the other in an absolute way.

This may seem somewhat exaggerated at this point, but it becomes more grounded if, for example, religious education or interreligious educational processes are no longer seen solely as encounters between different religious beliefs and traditions that need to be worked with, but rather, and very fundamentally, as encounters between people. It must remain clear that this is not to be understood naively and simplistically—this is what happens and the tasks that arise from it are not easy to master, but it is important to start precisely with these tasks and only then to contextualise the religious questions, similarities and differences within them.

6 Lévinas 1983.

## 5. Only human—more than a beginning

Finally, the perhaps somewhat erratic considerations addressed above should be summarised once again. Interreligious and intercultural learning can be understood as follows:

It is first and foremost an encounter between (us as) human beings, in a mixture of intrinsic and professional curiosity and that, which remains foreign. Both are necessary and appropriate.

Specific interreligious and intercultural topics and the controversies that arise in them are to be understood as an expression of an unfinished process of encountering, which each and every participant is called upon and entitled to continue.

Interreligious and intercultural encounters can be experienced by the individual, across all language, cultural and religious differences, as dynamizing for themselves—in the depths of their own self. This is especially true when we feel challenged, misunderstood and insecure.

Ultimately, we can become aware that every religion, every denomination, every philosophy and every world view only retain their right to exist if they do not become a self-referential ideology —the proof of this is their respective image of man, their respective anthropology and ultimately their philanthropy. Improving on this claim is perhaps a decisive motive for interreligious and intercultural work.

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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 competence[1] among future teachers.

Both in Switzerland[2] and internationally[3], 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 world[6], 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 context[14] 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 perspective[17] 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 migration[18], globalisation[19], displacement[20] 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 approach[22], the denominationally-cooperative perspective[23], and the ideologically-pluralisiticperspective.[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-Yildiz[28], 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 understanding[41] 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 verses[43] 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 Sarıkaya[47], 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 Yildiz 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.

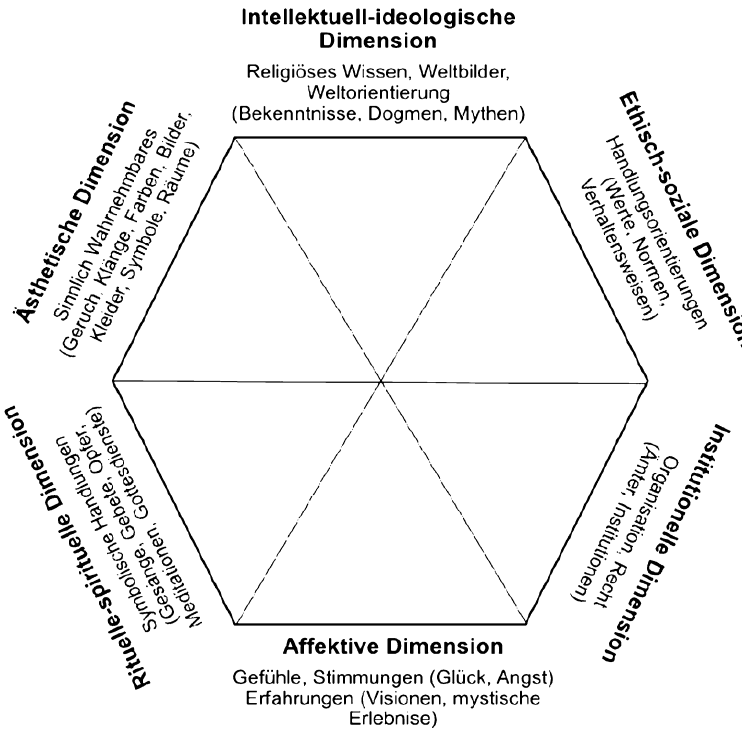


Figure 1: Dimensions of religion-related educational content, adapted from: Bühler et al., 2015, p. 22 and p. 26 from the research report on the qualitative–explorative study at the University of Teacher Education in St. Gallen (PHSG).

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.

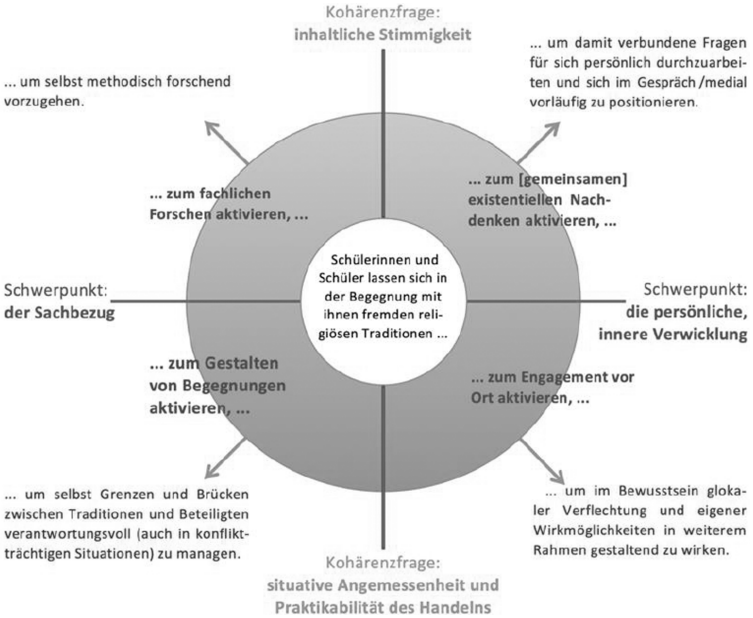


Figure 2: Modes of Religious Exploration as a graphical model, adapted from: K. Meyer (2019), "Foundations of Interreligious Learning", p. 178, from the research report on the qualitative–explorative study at the University of Teacher Education in St. Gallen (PHSG).

## 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 studythey 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.

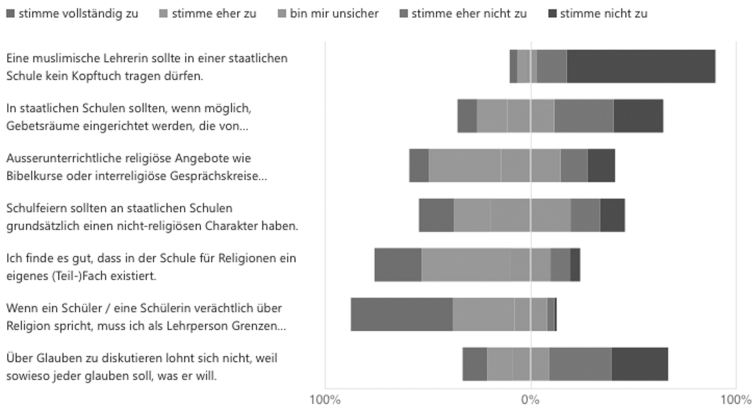


Figure 3: Presence of Religion and Tolerance in School Culture

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 approach[59], 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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# Theory and Practice in Interreligious Exchange

## Experiences and Reflections of a University Seminar on Christian-Muslim Dialogue

### 1. Introduction: The Genesis of the Continuous Seminar "Interfaith Learning" at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU)[1]

Interreligious dialogue and interreligious learning are both theoretical and practical concepts of theology and religious education that have been developed in order to reduce prejudices, engage in constructive professional exchange and, last but not least, strengthen peaceful coexistence and social cohesion—especially in pluralistic and multicultural societies. Daycare centres, universities and religious communities are common places where interfaith education can be found. Furthermore, interfaith issues bear significant relevance within the social, historical and cultural sciences, especially in theology and religious studies. In these two disciplines, comparative and interreligious studies as well as intertextual approaches have been developing more systematically and scientifically, particularly since the establishment of Islamic theological institutes at German and Austrian universities.[2]

1 A first, smaller report by the authors on the inter-theological cooperation in the seminar "Interreligious Learning" has been published in German in the Gießener Universitätsblätter 57 (2024), 75–84. This text has been translated using AI and has been reviewed by Patrick Brooks, Deborah Grün and Sebastian Alt as well as by the authors. We would like to thank them very much.

2 A decisive factor in the establishment of Islamic theological institutes and chairs in Germany was the correspondingly recommending report by the German Council of Science and Humanities from 2010: Wissenschaftsrat: Empfehlung zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen

At Justus Liebig University in Giessen, intensive interreligious cooperation has also developed in recent years between lecturers of Catholic, Protestant and Islamic theology, particularly as a result of the establishment of Islamic theology and religious education (winter semester 2011/12) and the implementation of corresponding degree programmes in the field of Islamic theology.[3] Since autumn 2011, the representatives of the three theologies have regularly exchanged ideas and cooperated with each other, both at the level of teaching and in the area of research and public education ("third mission"). The first mutual visits, brainstorming sessions and expert discussions quickly resulted in practical cooperation which, apart from structural communication in a joint "Theologicum"[4], comprised interreligious study programmes, joint seminars, lectures and publications.[5]

The aforementioned threefold cooperation (teaching, research, third mission) between the theological institutes and chairs (teaching, research, third mission) was brought together under the umbrella of the Focus Area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society", which is located at the Department 04 of History and Cultural Studies (and which will be explained in more detail in chapter 2 below), from 2019, when the scope of Islamic theology at Giessen was expanded to include a professorship which focused on Muslim lifestyles.

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Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen, on the Internet at: https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/9678-10.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2 (Last accessed 9 Mar. 2025), cf. ibid., 74 ff. on the establishment of theologically oriented Islamic studies in Germany.

3 One of the greatest specific features of the cooperation between the theologies in Giessen is the location of the theological institutes and chairs within the same faculty, the Department 04 for History and Cultural Studies https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/institute/index, accessed 9 Mar. 2025), which forms a very good institutional framework for trilateral cooperation.

4 The "Theologicum" — which takes place at least once a semester —is a forum for the three theological institutes. In this context, theologians of three theological traditions can report their academic activities, plan further cooperation and discuss several topics relevant to research and teaching.

5 For example, Yaşar Sarıkaya and Franz-Josef Bäumer jointly published an anthology in 2017. (Sarıkaya & Bäumer, 2017). The commemorative publication for Franz-Josef Bäumer was also published in 2019 in collaboration between the three theological institutes with the participation of academics from other institutes. (Kreutzer, Meuser, Novian & Schmidt, 2019).

This article focuses on one of the most fruitful examples of this joint work: These are courses on interreligious learning,[6] which have been offered continuously since the summer semester of 2012 in team teaching (between Catholic and Islamic theology). Against this background, the following questions will be explored in this article:

- What is the conceptual and structural framework of the seminar?
- What are the didactic guidelines that determine the overall concept of the seminar, its content and methodology?
- What are the main objectives?
- What are the topics or subject areas that are covered?
- How is the seminar received by the students?
- What practical effects / ideas / synergies can be developed from the seminar for a lively dialogue at the level of teaching, research and the third mission?

The article will pay special attention to the connection between the concept, implementation and acceptance of the event as well as to its institutional context, i.e. the cooperation between the theologies at the University of Giessen. The article is intended as a report on experiences and as a reflection on interreligious learning in a specific university context. It can serve as a possible impetus to initiate a comparative and mutually beneficial discussion on higher education, didactic experiences and insights gained at different universities with their respective (teaching) conditions.

## 2. The Focus Area "Theology/ies, Plurality, Society"

An important pillar of the institutionalised cooperation between Giessen's theologies (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic), is the aforementioned Focus Area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society", which is laid out in the so-called "Liebig Concept", i.e. the strategy paper for re-

6 The seminars were initiated by Franz-Josef Bäumer and Yaşar Sarıkaya in the summer semester of 2012 and have been held regularly once a year ever since, with the exception of one seminar during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. in the summer semester of 2020.

search at the University of Giessen.[7] The three keywords that highlight this cooperation between Giessen's theologies are intertwined concepts. Altogether, they describe the rough outlines of its concern and content.[8]

*Diversity:* In the symbolic centre of the triad "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society" is the central examination of the phenomenon of diversity that is typical of pluralistic late-modern society, with a clear focus on religious diversity (admittedly in combination with other diversities, such as gender, culture, classes, milieus, lifestyles, etc.).[9] In terms of reflecting on multi-, inter- and trans-religiosity, the focus is on religious traditions in their plurality ("multi-"), in their mutual interaction processes ("inter-") and in their overlaps, fusions and hybridisations ("trans-"). According to the participating chairs, the Protestant Christian, Catholic Christian and Sunni-Muslim major traditions are particularly focused on, without other religious traditions being ignored. In particular, the consideration of the religion and tradition of Judaism, also in terms of its current social significance, is an important concern for the sponsors of this specialisation area.

*Theology/ies:* Being labelled as a Focus Area of theology/ies with plurality at its centre means that the three theologies represent both its subject and object. The subjects, institutional sponsors of the co-

7 Focus areas are described as follows: "The Focus Areas of the departments (AB, abbreviation of the German term "Akzentbereiche") are research areas to which JLU commits itself as special focus in its research profile due to strategic considerations (e.g. visibility of a subject area as a kind of academic trademark, social responsibility of JLU) and which it promotes accordingly. Focus Areas are often located in the transitional area between individual research and collaborative research and are led by one or more departments. Focus Areas can develop into areas of potential ("Potentialbereiche") but can also be permanently organised as small high-performance units." (Justus Liebig University Giessen, n.d., "The Liebig Concept", https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/forschung/dateien/the-liebig-concept (Last accessed 9 Mar. 2025).

8 The website of the focus area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society" can be found at: https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie%28n%29 (Last accessed 9 Mar. 2025).

9 For initial orientation and a nuanced critical examination of the concept of diversity, under the history of the term and contemporary discourses, cf. Nieswand, 2013.

operative project, are the participating chairs of theology,[10] in interaction with non-theological perspectives. In addition, the focus on theology (in the singular of this perspective of reflection as well as in the plural of religious studies anchored in different religious traditions) is considered an object of academic reflection. From among the different dimensions of religions, particular consideration is given to the way they are rationalised within their (academic) theologies. The university level is particularly taken into consideration here.[11] In this respect, the Focus Area examines the theoretical foundations and social relevance of self-reflection on religious traditions from an internal perspective, which, of course, must always be in exchange with the external perspective. The Focus Area sees itself as a cooperative and comparative body of self-reflection for the different theologies at the university, which is embedded in a plural and diverse society itself. In this respect, the Focus Area has explicit theoretical, sociological and socio-ethical dimensions.

*Society*: As already mentioned in the title keywords "diversity" and "theology/ies", the social relevance of the Focus Area is central to its self-image. The Focus Area represents both an image that reflects and a forum for reflection on a pluralistic, i.e. multi-religious and post-secular[12] society. In this context, it is helpful to distinguish between several aspects of the concept of pluralism, as the sociologist of knowledge and religion Peter L. Berger does: With regard to the existence of both explicitly religious and explicitly non-religious world views and perspectives, Berger speaks of double pluralism, which consists in the "co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses".[13] In addition, Berger

10 A total of nine chairs for Protestant (four), Catholic (three) and Islamic theology (two) are involved; cf. on the professors: https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie(n)/personen (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

11 See also the recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities on the further development of theologies and religion-related sciences at German universities (Wissenschaftsrat, 2010) and on the specifics of theologies in overlap with and in distinction to religious studies perspectives, for example. Kreutzer, 2017, offers a Catholic theological perspective on this.

12 The term "post-secular", which describes the coexistence of religious and secular options, was prominently introduced by the well-known social philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 2001). Further discussions on the topic can be found in the anthology by Gmainer-Pranzl & Rettenbacher, 2013, among others.

13 Berger 2014, IX.

also distinguishes between *descriptive plurality* as the mere coexistence of different world views and religions on the one hand, and *normative pluralism* as the successful coexistence of diverse groups, cultures, religions and world views on the other. "Pluralism is a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, world views, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably."[14] The Focus Area adopts these two differentiations. On the one hand, it seeks to analyse and explore the social presence of neighbouring religious and non-religious groups as well as that of different forms of expression and discourses through a variety of perspectives based on different religious traditions, hermeneutical approaches and theological disciplines. On the other hand, from a theological perspective focused on normative claims to validity, thought is given to the successful ("peaceful" and "amicable", Berger) coexistence of different religious and non-religious groups, cultures, discourses and world views. *If these perspectives are synthesised, the Focus Area is essentially concerned with reflecting on productive contributions from religious traditions (with a focus on Protestant, Catholic and Islamic faiths) and from their (institutionalised) self-rationalisation ("theology/ies") for a pluralistic society—in Berger's positive normative sense.* In this respect, for example, topics such as the diversity of holy scriptures (Bible, Qur'an) and traditions (Hadith and Sunna, highlights of church history, e.g. the Reformation, confessionalisation) in their respective historical contexts, political theologies and religious ethics, theological research into emotions, religions in social fields and lifeworlds, processes of secularisation and their theological interpretations (e.g. the concept of the "death of God"), interreligious education (e.g. the future of (trans-)denominational religious education), migration research, religious radicalisation, racism and religion as well as theological gender perspectives.[15]

The impetus for the Focus Area from the Liebig Concept's research strategy was taken up from the outset in such a way that it

14 Berger 2014, 1.

15 See the projects of the AB: https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie(n)/Projekte, as well as the publications related to them: https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie(n)/veroeffentlichungen (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

was linked to cooperation at the levels of research, teaching and the university's third mission. Individual activities at these levels can be cited as examples: At the level of *research*, there is a joint academic book series entitled "Theology in a plural society", joint publications,[16] a joint research colloquium by the three Giessen theologies, in which primarily papers for university qualifications are presented and discussed, and research projects that are anchored in the respective theologies but mostly have interreligious and intertheological references. At the *teaching* level, for example, there is interreligious team teaching in courses (such as the seminar on interreligious learning presented here), interreligious modules in the individual theological study programmes[17] and the courses offered jointly by the theologies in the ethics teaching degree programmes at JLU.[18] The *third mission*, the public presence of university activities in society, is naturally a central concern of the Focus Area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society". For example, the three theologies are jointly responsible for an annual *Dies Academicus*, which is aimed at a wider audience, with high-profile topics, an "Evening Lecture on Culture and Religion" (in the winter semester 23/24, for example, on "Anthropology and Theology/ies from an Interreligious Perspective") and other lecture formats.

In this respect, the (meanwhile) institutionalised seminar "Interreligious Learning: Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue" (see below) is an elaborate, multidimensional format that links the three university levels (research, teaching and the third mission) both

16 See volume 1 of the aforementioned series Theologie in pluraler Gesellschaft ("Theology in a Plural Society"), the anthology by Çakir-Mattner, David & Kreutzer (2022) entitled Theologie(n) und Modernisierung. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven aus Judentum, Christentum und Islam ("Theology/ies und Modernization. Interdisciplinary perspectives from Judaism, Christianity and Islam").

17 This is the case, for example, in the BA programmes in History and Cultural Studies with the subjects Contextual Islamic Studies or Catholic Theology at JLU, Giessen.

18 This applies to the teacher training programmes for primary school (L1) and secondary school (L2), each with ethics as a subject at JLU, Giessen. (For a summary of the examination and module regulations of JLU, Giessen, including the degree programmes mentioned, see: https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/mug/7 (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025)).

thematically and at the level of activities. It remains a challenge to achieve positive results from this strong institutional and content-related localisation and anchoring of the seminar and to stimulate an understanding among the participating students from which they benefit. The following didactic considerations on the seminar and the analyses of student feedback can be seen in this context.

## 3. The Seminar "Interreligious Learning: Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue"

As already mentioned, the seminar "Interreligious Learning: Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue" has been held every summer semester since 2012—with slight changes to the title and content each time.[19] Due to its regularity, systematic conception and complexity of content as well as its practical theological effects and practical relevance, this course offers a sustainable, sincere dialogue between teachers and students of the two institutes for Catholic and Islamic theology.

The seminar is based on a series of social, cultural and theological prerequisites and framework conditions, which are briefly outlined below:

### Social, theological and pedagogical background to the course

*The social reality*: As already highlighted, German society has become more multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual—in Leimgruber's words "more colourful"—in the last half century than ever before in its history, primarily as a result of migration and globalisation.[20] This change is most evident in kindergartens, schools and universities. In the first grade of a primary school in Giessen, for example, pupils from ethnically, culturally and religiously di-

19 There are also other examples of team teaching between the three theologies. One example is the Protestant/Islamic theological seminar "Scriptural Reasoning — in dialogue about texts from the Bible and Koran" by Ute Eva Eisen and Naime Çakir-Mattner in the summer semester of 2022.

20 Leimgruber 2007.

verse backgrounds sit side by side. The same applies to university lecture theatres. This development brings with it a number of social, political and educational challenges, which include, for example, the issue of mutual distrust between "native" people, who are primarily Christian or secular, and "immigrants", many of whom are Muslim,[21] which can be based on deep-rooted prejudices from history and experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, as revealed in the regular surveys conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation's *Religion Monitor*.[22] In this context, the interfaith seminars are based on the need to make a positive contribution to the strengthening of civilian understanding and an "inclusive sense of unity" in light of the aforementioned challenges of multiethnicity etc., as envisaged by the Bertelsmann Foundation.[23]

*Theological interdependence:* Although there are many elements that connect Christianity and Islam (e.g. common origin, central figures such as Abraham, Jesus, Mary, etc.), the tensions, rivalries and even wars between members of these two religions, which are mostly due to political will to power and the desire for supremacy, often take precedence over mutual interest in getting to know each other, understanding, dialogue or empathy. One of the theological foundations and academic motivations for this seminar is the close relationship of the religious scriptures of both religions. As the religious scholar Stefan Schreiner points out, the Qur'an and the Bible, for example, "are connected, and this is not a one-way street; on the contrary, the connection between the two scriptures seems to be a mutual relationship that can be described as interdependence".[24] Schreiner therefore describes the Qur'an "as an interpretation of the Bible—the Bible as an aid to understanding the Qur'an".[25] From an Islamic perspective, this closer connection can be illustrated particularly in Qur'anic narratives. The Qur'an contains many stories that

21 Strictly speaking, the term "Christian and Muslim" does not refer to religious affiliation and practice, but rather to a kind of cultural identity and self-perception.

22 See https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/51_Religionsmonitor/Zusammenfassung_der_Sonderauswertung.pdf (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

23 This intention corresponds to Berger's normative pluralism.

24 Schreiner 2019, 41–60. Transl.

25 Schreiner 2010, 167–183. Transl.

refer to biblical and non-biblical narratives. As the Innsbruck-based Muslim theologian Abdullah Takım notes, the Qur'an is therefore "*a multi-referential, written, orally transmitted word that reflects on itself and the other Holy Scriptures*".[26]

As far as Christian theology is concerned, the interest in Islam and its religious sources is particularly evident in the context of the comparative theology approach, among others. In an intertextual reading, this model can offer the opportunity to gain new perspectives on one's own faith.

In short, cooperative seminars can provide new impetus and synergies for interreligious cooperation, both in theological–historical studies (e.g. genesis and exegesis of religious scriptures, Christian–Islamic tensions and polemics, interactions, intertextuality, etc.) and in relation to current challenges in the context of religion and society (plurality, diversity, violence, etc.).

*School and university education*: The environments in which ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and multilingualism manifest themselves most clearly are kindergartens, schools and universities. In this respect, religious pluralism, mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence and dialogue are among the important overarching goals and competences of all curricula. Against this background, it is an educational necessity to enable future kindergarten and schoolteachers, theologians and religious personnel to accept the respective other as they are and to live together with them on the basis of shared values in a culture of mutual acceptance in educational processes from kindergarten to higher education.

The seminars on interreligious learning have been held continuously since 2012 on the basis of these prerequisites and objectives in team teaching between the Catholic religious education professor Franz-Josef Bäumer and the Islamic religious education professor Yaşar Sarıkaya (until the summer semester 2019) and between the Catholic systematic theologian Ansgar Kreutzer and Yaşar Sarıkaya (since the summer semester 2021). The courses have been well received and attended by students from both institutes—and even by students of ethics. In some semesters, they even achieved the highest number of participants in the entire range of courses offered by the two institutes. In two semesters, several students had to be excluded,

26 Takim 2007, 156. Transl.

and they had to postpone their participation until the following semester.

Despite a noticeable hesitancy in the first few weeks, the students take the special opportunity to get to know each other, work together in groups and discuss during the remainder of the semester. This is not only about working out the "common core" ("gemeinsamer Kern"), as Johannes Lähnemann[27] and Stefan Leimgruber[28] point out, but also about the willingness to deal with one's own faith in a self-critical and varying way, as Abdoljawad Falaturi presupposes to ensure a successful dialogue.[29] As a smaller survey analysed in the following section (Chapter 4) shows, all these activities bring the students closer together, create respectful interaction and help to reduce prejudices. This undoubtedly contributes positively to their view of themselves and others.

The first three weeks of the course usually include a theoretical and theological introduction to interreligious learning by the lecturers. In this context, the theological foundation as well as sociological justification of interreligious dialogue are of central importance. In the following weeks, students usually give presentations in pairs or groups on the topics they have worked on as part of the seminar programme. Care is taken to ensure that the groups are made up of students from different degree programmes (Catholic Theology, Islamic Theology, Ethics), in order to enable the exchange of multiple perspectives—even beyond the seminar itself/sessions themselves, as the students have to conduct their preparations together in mixed pairs or small groups. The presentations are based on relevant literature, which is also made available as part of the seminar's syllabus. Each presentation is followed by a question-and-answer session and an evaluation.

The group work and the discussions (see the ratings in the survey below) are noteworthy for the (active) practice of/engagement in dialogue. The students have the opportunity to express, reflect on and analyse their experiences, observations and even prejudices with regard to the topic at hand. In this way, they can openly address misinformation and prejudices and gain new experiences. All these

27 Lähnemann 2017, 84 f.
28 Leimgruber 2007, 74 f.
29 Falaturi 1996, 160 f.

interactive processes can not only reduce mutual prejudices, but can also lead to mutual learning, empathy and reconciliation as well as to the ability to reflect on one's own views and habits.

Finally, it deserves to be mentioned here that in the last two years, 12th grade students of Catholic religious education from Giessen took part in a seminar session, which gave them an insight into university teaching and interreligious dialogue at an academic level. In the future, it would be useful to extend such visits to other schools and parts of society, both for cooperation between universities, schools and the public and for the promotion of interfaith dialogue beyond Giessen University.

## Subject: Theological and Religious Education Topics as Food for Thought and the use of Media

Against the background of the aforementioned conceptual paradigms, the content of the seminars can be divided into three main blocks:

The *first block, "Foundations"*, deals with an introduction to the theory and theology of interreligiosity, as well as the foundations of interreligious learning from a Christian and Islamic theological perspective. For Catholic Christianity, the decrees of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65)—especially the document *Nostra Aetate* on the relationship of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions—are discussed as the most striking, clearest and strongest theological basis for interreligious dialogue. For an Islamic justification, on the other hand, those verses of the Qur'an take centre stage which directly or indirectly express religious pluralism or explain diversity in terms of divine will.[30] This theological foundation is further developed through sociological theories and justifications as well as their embedding in the context of religious, cultural and social tensions, conflicts and discourses that pluralism in multicultural societies entails.

30 Qur'an: 5/48; 2/62; 49/13. In this context, the "Common Word" of 2007 is also an interesting source of inspiration. For more information, see e.g.: https://www.acommonword.com/downloads/CW-Booklet-Final-v6_8-1-09.pdf (Last accessed 9 Dec. 2024). See also: Brooks 2020.

The *second block, "Topics"*, deals with the main themes of Christian and Islamic theology. These include God and images of God, the understanding of revelation and prophecy, prophets (especially Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad), holy scriptures (especially the Bible and Qur'an), religious places and their functions, and religious practices and rituals. On the basis of these elementary theological topics, central convergences and differences between Islam and Christianity are worked out and discussed in groups or in plenary sessions.

The *third block, "Fields of practice"*, focuses on practical theology and religious education. Against the backdrop of discussions about religious freedom / religious education, sacred spaces (churches and mosques) and schools are discussed as fields of action for interreligious learning. Of central importance here are the questions of the necessity of interreligious learning and the tasks and goals associated with them as well as the opportunities offered by and limitations of denominational religious education in schools. A special look is taken at textbooks of the other religion "from the inside" and "from the outside" in order to find out whether and to what extent mutual prejudices, clichés or stereotypes still play a role. It becomes clear that interreligious and intercultural learning is not only a necessary concern of Islamic and Christian religious education and school culture as a whole but also imparts key competences in a multi-religious and multicultural society.

A particular highlight of the seminars are the excursions to Giessen's "places of worship", which are organised as part of the "Fields of Practice" block with a focus on "sacred spaces". There are a total of four mosques in Giessen, two of which have been visited. Founded in 1977, the Turkish–Islamic Community of Giessen e. V. (Türkisch-Islamische Gemeinde zu Gießen) has the largest membership and is part of the umbrella organisation of the Turkish–Islamic Union of the Institute for Religion (DİTİB).[31] The two-storey *Bait us-Samad* ("House of the Absolute") mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Germany (AMJ), which opened in 2021, is located in

31 For further information, see: https://ditibgiessen.jimdofree.com/%C3%BCberuns/ (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

its immediate vicinity.[32] Both associations, i.e. the DİTİB and AMJ, are religious communities that are recognised by the Hessian state government as partners in the Islamic religious education offered at public schools in Hessen and they are representative of the diversity within the Islamic spectrum.

There are three Catholic churches in Giessen, all of which have already been visited at least once as part of the seminar.[33] In the last two years, the group went to St. Thomas More Church (St. Thomas Morus-Kirche), which was built after the Second World War as a result of increased migration by Catholics to Giessen.[34] The church and its history offer a good opportunity to talk about migration and having a minority status as a religious community or about the desire/necessity to have representative sacred buildings. Theologically, the church interior of St. Thomas More is strongly influenced by the Second Vatican Council.[35]

The excursions are divided into three parts in terms of content and theme:

1. *information:* This involves brief information about the host community and about the construction and architectural features of the church visited, which is usually provided by the staff there.
2. *papers or presentations*. The students who have worked on the relevant topic in the respective week give a presentation on the religious significance and function of places of worship in Christianity and Islam, using the example of the church or mosque visited (usually in groups of two or three).
3. *exchange* between the visitors and the (religious) staff of the host congregation. This usually takes place in the form of introductions and questions and answers but also gives participants the opportunity to meet each other in person, exchange ideas

32 For further information. see Berghöfer 2021 / Official website of the Ahmadiyya community: https://ahmadiyya.de/gebetsstaette/moscheen/giesen/ (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

33 These are the churches of St. Boniface (St. Bonifatius), St. Albertus and St. Thomas More (St. Thomas Morus) in the city of Giessen.

34 For more information on the beginnings of the parish: https://bistummainz.de/pfarrei/giessen-st-thomas-morus/pfarrei/anfaenge/ (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

35 Cf. from a wealth of literature, e.g. Renz 2014.

and engage in discussions. Thus, many students come into direct contact with representatives of the religious communities, get to know them on site and get impressions on a personal basis. In other words, interfaith dialogue is *experienced* in a practical and direct way.

## 4. Results of a Small-Scale Survey in the Seminar and (First/Instant) Conclusions

### Intentions and Questionnaire

The reflections presented here are open for discussion. They are based on experiences with the seminar "Interreligious learning. Fundamentals of Islamic–Christian Dialogue" and should not only be based on the institutional framework (chapter 2) and the didactic and conceptual considerations (chapter 3), but also on the participants' feedback. For this purpose, a straightforward, two-page questionnaire was created, which contained closed and open questions and enabled initial quantitative and qualitative analyses.[36] This questionnaire was handed out in the final session of the seminar in the summer semester 2023 and took around 15 minutes to be filled out. Sociometric data was collected (gender, age, semester, subjects) as well as data on the students' reasons for attending the seminar, the content of the seminar (in the area of interreligious di-

36 Methodologically elaborated studies on a similar topic—relating to interreligious learning in a university context—have been reflected on in the following publications: Kürzinger & Schneider 2018 use statistical indicators and correlations to identify factors for favourable learning outcomes in the sense of better self-perception and self-reflection of religious positioning. In Ratzke n.d. / Ratzke 2021, one of the aims is to empirically evaluate the method of learning through encounters to build interreligious competence and to draw conclusions from the university context examined and apply them to a school context. A kind of meta-study could make interesting comparisons between interreligious university learning and teaching under different constellations. The cursory self-reflections presented here on the seminar "Interreligious learning. Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue", which has been held regularly at JLU, Giessen for several years, are aimed at taking into account the specific institutional context of this course and, as already mentioned, have the intention of stimulating exchange on interreligious learning across locations.

alogue, knowledge building in the Christian and Islamic religions), the "sources of learning" in the seminar and the impact of the seminar beyond the end of the course.[37] Against the background of what has been outlined so far, in terms of evaluation it is interesting to examine to what extent the students' responses reflect or do not reflect the didactic considerations on the seminar's design.

## Analyses

Fifteen students took part in the small-scale survey,[38] all of whom were female. The age structure, the semesters previously attended by the participants and the chosen subjects were as follows:

Table 1: Age structure

| Age (in years) | Number of students |
|---|---|
| 21 | 2 |
| 22 | 8 |
| 25 | 2 |
| 27 | 2 |
| Not specified | 1 |

Average age: 22.9 years

37 In this respect, there are similarities with regard to the three educational components (competence building, knowledge development, attitude change), which C. P. Sajak mentions in his highly nuanced discussion and evaluation of various models of and settings for interreligious learning (in the five dimensions: didactic model, organisation, content, methods, evaluation / assessment perspective): "Religious education arises through the interplay of competence development, knowledge building and attitude change." (Sajak 2018, 93; for context: ibid., 82–117). In the survey within our seminar, competence development refers, for example, to the development of dialogue skills, to the acquisition of knowledge of factual and reflective knowledge regarding Christian and Islamic beliefs and to changes in attitudes, i.e. to the effects of the course in question on the (interreligiously relevant) attitudes of the participants beyond the end of the seminar.

38 According to the student administration body, a total of 27 students participated in the seminar, including one male and 26 females; one student of ethics in the secondary school teaching programme; 18 students of Islamic religion / theology; eight students of Catholic religion / theology.

Table 2: Number of semesters

| Semester | Number of students |
|---|---|
| 4th semester | 6 |
| 6th semester | 7 |
| Not specified | 2 |

Table 3: Subject combinations

| Selected subjects | Number of students |
|---|---|
| Primary school teaching degree (L1) with the subjects German, maths and Islamic religion | 10 |
| Secondary school teaching degree (L2) with the subjects German and Catholic religion | 2 |
| Secondary school teaching degree (L2) with the subjects English and Catholic religion | 1 |
| BA in education outside the formal education system with Catholic theology | 1 |
| Not specified | 1 |

The sociometric distributions are mainly derived from the degree programmes offered and the studying regulations. They are younger students (on average around 23 years old) in the middle semesters (4–6), with ten students of Islamic religion (71 %) compared to four students studying Catholic religion or Catholic theology (29 %). The fact that the students of Islamic theology only study to become primary school teachers (L1) is due to the range of courses offered at JLU, Giessen, which is also intended by federal state policy and where Islamic religion is only offered for this teacher training programme. In the module regulations for Catholic religion, on the other hand, this seminar is can be taken as part of teaching degree programmes for secondary schools as well as BA degree programmes.

In the open question about the participants' motivation for attending the seminar (multiple answers possible), more than 20 responses were cited. Organisational reasons for choosing the course were cited (the time available and the studying regulations were

both mentioned once). The context was mentioned twice insofar as recommendations from other students were cited as a motivation. However, most of the mentions were related to the interest and relevance of the subject matter, which was seen both in the private environment and in the later field of work at school. At the same time, key areas of interest were mentioned, such as interreligious exchange, dialogue or the intention to learn new things about each other. Strikingly, social context (such as a pluralistic society or political conflicts with religious underpinning) or the intention to get a deeper understanding of one's own religion played no role in this question.

In the questionnaire, the content(-related) aspects that the students remembered from the seminar were divided into four areas: 1. dialogue, 2. knowledge of Christianity, 3. knowledge of Islam and 4. religious practice (i.e. both the acquisition of skills in dialogue and the acquisition of theological knowledge of religion). In the dialogue section, 15 responses were made in open questions with the possibility of multiple answers. Frequent reference was made here to similarities and differences and to comparisons; at the same time, attitudes (apparently learnt or deepened in the seminar) were mentioned: appreciation, understanding, openness and respect. In one mention, the social framework was also emphasised: peaceful coexistence. Overall, therefore, the students' self-perception of their knowledge and attitude competencies are mixed. There were 15 mentions of Christianity, with the topic of "Trinity" dominating with five mentions (i.e. 1/3; 33 %). Interestingly, only one mention was made by students of Christian religion/theology with regard to this item; apparently this group was more interested in learning outcomes in the area of dialogue or Islam. The survey on the content of Islamic religion produced 18 responses. Here, both students of Christian religion/theology and Islamic religion provided information. There are answers both at the meta level, e.g. on prior knowledge, dealing with prejudices, new insights, information, similarities and on specific topics of Islamic religion. The mentions of content-related topics reflect quite clearly the topics that were discussed in the seminar sessions, the literature used there and the presentations: Qur'an, Bible, understanding of God, Muhammad, Jesus and mosques. The rather abstract and reflexive concept of revelation (the explicit subject of one seminar session) is not mentioned.

There are 15 mentions of the topic of practice, of which six (more than one third; 40 %) explicitly refer to the excursions and seven (almost half, 46 %) to the discussion of textbooks. Interestingly, the visit of a school class (12th grade, secondary school (Gymnasium) accompanied by their teacher in the field of Catholic religion) is not mentioned at all. Social context is referred to twice in this regard. The place of religion in society and the emerging decline in Christian religious practice are each cited once as a gain in knowledge.

The question on "learning sources" was asked as a closed question with a scale of five to one (important to unimportant), so that average values (according to the scale between one and five) could be determined. The following learning sources received high approval (> 4) with the following average values: small group discussion with 4.5; excursions with 4.5; lecturers with 4.3; and representatives of religious communities with 4.2. Lower approval (< 4) was given to requests to speak with students of another subject with 3.9; plenary discussions with 3.9; guests (Catholic religion/religious education class and teacher) with 3.5; self-study (primarily via provided or partially pre-researched [bibliography] literature) with 3.5; and requests to speak with students from the same subject with 3.5. This value is therefore below the value of 3.9 for requests to speak with students of another subject. With this item, it is noticeable that discursive learning methods with a high proportion of discussion (especially small group discussions) and the illustrative, experience-orientated methods of excursions to sacred spaces are highly valued with the highest approval rating of 4.5; in contrast, the approval rating for plenary discussions is somewhat lower at 3.9. Self-study, together with other options, received the lowest approval rating at 3.5. Overall, however, none of the learning sources mentioned were ranked below the middle value on the scale: 3.0. In addition to the positively rated discursiveness, the "crossing of perspectives", which is considered to be conducive to learning, is also striking, insofar as learning from the statements of students from another subject (value: 3.9) ranks noticeably higher than learning from students from the same subject (value 3.5).

The last part of the questionnaire was dedicated to the impact of the seminar, i.e. its continued effect on the students after the end of the course. Of the 15 respondents, twelve (i.e. 80 %) stated that they wanted to continue working on interreligious dialogue (two

answered no to this question and one did not specify an answer). Three forums were named: school, i.e. the respondents' primary future professional field, the private sphere and the area of attitudes, in the sense of increased awareness of religious diversity, seeking contact with people of other religions and overcoming restraint.[39] Finally, evaluation questions were asked. In terms of what the students liked, two areas in particular were addressed: the discursiveness (exchange, dialogue with multiple responses, and also texts and presentations on one occasion) and the open, self-confident and discussion-friendly atmosphere (friendliness of the lecturers, respect, atmosphere, being able to express one's own opinion, . . . ). This item, as with the responses on the acquisition of skills and knowledge, also confirms the importance of discursiveness and open exchange, especially within a seminar that is explicitly dedicated to reflection and the method and content of interreligious dialogue. When the participants were asked what they did not like, there were two main areas of responses: firstly, from an organisational point of view, the lack of time, especially when carrying out the excursions (to churches and mosques), which had to be completed within 90 minutes for technical reasons; secondly, further discursive approaches were called for in addition to those already introduced. For example, there were two complaints about too much "frontal teaching", which presumably related to the 20-minute presentations, the only monologue elements of the sessions (albeit in mixed presentation groups). The deliberately open-ended final question about personal comments and remarks emphasised the points already mentioned, particularly the positive assessment of the discussion and excursion formats and the stimulating atmosphere for exchange. One explicit reference was made to the framework of university cooperation between the Giessen theologies ("cooperation between the theologies").

39 The three components of (interreligious) education, skills development, knowledge building and attitude change (especially the latter), are alluded to here as objectives to be pursued after the event.

## Conclusions From the Feedback

Initial analyses of the small empirical survey on the seminar provide some insights into its relevance (1), the significance of its institutional framing (2) and university didactic observations (3):

(1) The relevance of the seminar is seen both in its significance for the participants' own lives and for the professional field of school teaching. Both are important for the participants. As shown, the social framework is also mentioned on one occasion or another, but less prominently than the private environment and school. In this respect, the ability to deal with plurality and interreligious competence are just as personally and professionally relevant for the students surveyed; they obviously determine—in their own perception—the living environment of the interviewees as well as Christian and Islamic religious education in the present and future. The strong orientation of the underlying institutional cooperation of Giessen theology on social issues is not evident in this explicit way among the students. Since religious diversity is relevant to the students' lifeworlds and their prospective professional field as teachers, it implicitly plays a major role.
(2) The institutional framework of the seminar is definitely mentioned at times, e.g. when reference is made to social contexts, studying regulations or recommendations for other students to attend the seminar (which is only possible through the institutionalised/continuous offering of such a course). However, general interest in the topic is predominant. In this respect, the Focus Area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society" at JLU, Giessen does not so much induce a preoccupation with religious diversity in the social environment and in theological reflections; as an institution, it rather reflects/mirrors this fact, takes it up and deepens/consolidates it.
(3) In terms of higher education didactics, the pervasive positive evaluations and demands for discursive and experiential educational elements (small group discussions, excursions) are striking, behind which the elements of knowledge building (texts, self-study, presentations) lag behind in popularity among students. A central didactic challenge in the interreligious seminar

is to achieve a good balance between the development of content-related knowledge and the acquisition of methodological skills, so that not only can methods of learning be acquired, but so can necessary knowledge and skills of (self-)reflection. Altogether, these competences are essential for a thorough interfaith dialogue. Practical applicability (for example with the popular topic of "textbooks"), professional relevance and an interest in the topic based on one's own living environment are the driving forces behind interreligious learning in the context of the seminar. They need to be taken up and linked with less explicit but important learning objectives (e.g. the importance of theological reflective knowledge and the social relevance of the topic).

## Conclusion

For more than ten years, the seminars on interreligious learning and dialogue at JLU, Giessen have not only contributed to increasing interest in questions of interreligiosity but have also facilitated valuable encounters and a mutual understanding between students. At the same time, the seminars are a testimony to the constructive cooperation between Giessen's theologies at the institutional university level. We consider this form of academic interreligiousness in the areas of teaching, research and the third mission to be an important driver in contributing to a positive culture of pluralism in a multi-religious and multicultural society.

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*Ali Ayten*

# Exploring the Impacts of Religion on Pro-Environmental Attitudes and Behaviour

## A Quantitative Analysis within Muslim Samples and Its Contribution to Interreligious Knowledge

### Introduction

When I was a child, my grandfather and I used to go to the forest near our house to cut wood. Instead of simply cutting down the nearest and easiest tree, my grandfather had a different approach. He would search for dried, decaying logs from trees that had previously been cut down. With a pickaxe, he would carefully dig out the root sides of the log and then break it into pieces using an axe. This process required a lot of time and effort, and as a young child, I would often find myself waiting for him for what felt like an eternity. My already limited patience was put to the test during these moments. However, my grandfather had a reason for his method. He could have easily cut down the first fresh tree he spotted, fulfilling our daily or weekly wood requirements much faster. But he chose not to do that. When I pointed to the little newly grown oak trees and asked him why we didn't cut them down, he would stop, wipe the sweat from his brow and explain his philosophy to me kindly. He would say, "Is it alright, my dear? These trees will grow and flourish. They will put down roots and spread their branches. The dried ones are the ones that need to be cut. As custodians of the natural world, we must not harm the young saplings that Allah has entrusted to us." My grandfather had a special relationship with trees, forests and the environment. He considered them a sacred trust (*amanah*), seeing himself as a guardian of nature rather than its master. As the years went by, I saw how deeply he cared for the forest near the plateau. Even when the state cut down the trees for renewal

purposes, he accepted the situation, but it saddened him deeply, and he shed tears for the loss. Now, reflecting on those memories, I realise that my own connection with the natural environment is vastly different from my grandfather's. Today, I see my children growing up in an urban environment, far removed from the beauty of the forest. Their interaction with nature is limited to the potted flowers they see in our apartment and the greenery they watch in documentaries. I think that my grandfather's profound respect and love for nature is a rare and precious mindset that might be fading away with each passing generation. His wisdom and appreciation for the natural world have left a lasting impact on me, and I hope to instil some of that reverence for nature in my children, even though their experiences may be quite different from my own childhood adventures in the forest with my beloved grandfather.

In this chapter, I delve into the intricate interplay between religion and environmental issues. My primary objective is to scrutinise the relationship between religiosity and environmental orientations, encompassing both dominion and stewardship orientations, as well as environmental behaviour, which encompass a spectrum ranging from active environmentalism—such as attending information meetings about environmental problems, participating in demonstrations against environmental pollution and engaging in tree planting campaigns—to waste management practices—such as minimising waste of resources like bread, water, and energy, critically evaluating draft papers and adopting energy-saving technologies.

My contribution to the scholarly discourse emanates from a synthesis of data sourced from various studies conducted among Muslim populations (including Turkish, Jordanian and British Muslims) spanning the years 2010 to 2022. By meticulously evaluating and deliberating upon these empirical findings, I aim to address a conspicuous void in research literature characterised by a dearth of investigations involving non-Judeo-Christian samples.

Moreover, beyond the mere compilation and analysis of empirical evidence, my scholarly endeavour aspires to enrich interreligious learning. Through a nuanced examination of the human–nature relationship from an Islamic theological perspective, I endeavour to contribute to the broader tapestry of interfaith discourse. To this end, I compare and interrogate findings derived from four distinct

empirical studies with the theological underpinnings articulated within Islamic texts. This comparative analysis seeks to elucidate the convergence and divergence between empirical observations and doctrinal precepts, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the religious dimensions of environmental discourse.

## Judeo-Christian Approach to the Human–Nature Relationship

Almost all religions have dealt with the human–nature relationship in their main texts, although they have different contents and intensities. Again, it can be said that all religions put forward principles that support environmental awareness and morality and advise the protection of the environment. In this regard, the teachings of religions on the human–nature relationship have been discussed in many works.[1]

In the current chapter under consideration, significant attention is directed towards elucidating the perspectives of both the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam concerning the subject matter discussed, alongside their practical implications. Notably, within Western scholarly discourse, the topic has garnered considerable attention, particularly within the purview of social scientific inquiry. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that investigations within Western academia predominantly emanate from a Judeo-Christian vantage point. Explorations into the nexus between humanity and nature within Western scholarly endeavours encompass a multifaceted approach, drawing from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, politics and theology. When the subject is associated with religion, relevant social scientists generally sought answers to the following questions: What is the relationship between religiosity and environmental awareness and morality? Does religiosity affect individuals' orientation towards the natural environment? How does religiosity support individuals in exhibiting environmentalist attitudes and behaviour?

Addressing the eco-theological discourse in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Harper identified four foundations regarding the rela-

1 Tanner/Mitchell, 2002.

tionship of man with nature. According to him, this eco-theological view and these foundations are based on the theory of creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition and the environmental stewardship approach.[2]

(a) Nature is endowed with spiritual values and has a sacred meaning.
(b) As a part of nature, humanity is obliged to protect it.
(c) Religious groups with these principles should have and develop a viewpoint that ascribes holiness to nature.
(d) These beliefs can create an ecologically sustainable society.

In the studies carried out in Judeo-Christian culture, investigations have delved into the intricate interplay between attitudes and behaviour concerning environmental stewardship and various dimensions of religiosity, encompassing religious commitment, beliefs and values. Diverse findings have emerged from these inquiries.[3] Certain studies have posited a positive correlation between environmental consciousness and behaviour and indicators of religiosity, including religious commitment and beliefs. This suggests that religiosity serves as a facilitator, augmenting individuals' proclivity towards heightened environmental awareness and protective actions, bolstered by an imbued sense of stewardship. Concurrently, empirical evidence has underscored the role of religious inclinations in engendering environmentally conscious behaviour, such as refraining from purchasing products deemed detrimental to the environment and adopting lifestyle modifications conducive to environmental preservation. However, scholarly discourse also reflects a divergence of perspectives. Some investigations have yielded inconclusive findings, thus indicating a lack of substantive correlation between these variables. Conversely, certain studies have even posited a negative association, suggesting that heightened religiosity may impede environmental awareness and behaviour, ostensibly diminishing their prevalence.

In this research, religious people who could not reflect the teachings of religion in their lives were held responsible for the emer-

2 Harper 2008, 8–9.

3 Wolkomir/Futreal/Woodrum/Hoban 1997 / Briguglio/Garcia-Muñoz/Neuman 2020 / Ayten 2021 / Aydemir 2022.

gence of environmental problems, rather than religion's understanding of nature and environmentalism. However, in general, in the last quarter century, many researchers around the world have dealt with religious traditions and the basic principles that these traditions create about the human–nature relationship in order to develop more environmentally friendly, responsible and sensitive environmental ethics. In the West, social scientists, who are interested in environmental problems, especially global warming and climate changes, and who think that religion can contribute to solving these problems and to the development of effective environmental morality, show an interest in Eastern and Far Eastern religious cultures apart from the Jewish Christian tradition. Within this framework, they refer to these cultures in solving environmental problems.[4] The current chapter does not include evaluations of the Far East religions on the human–nature relationship and the research on the pro-nature attitudes and behaviour of the individuals belonging to those religions.

## Islamic Perspective on the Human–Nature Link

According to Islam, the Almighty Creator created everything using a scale (*mizan*). He created a balance and fundamental laws (*hududullah*) for the occurrence of events in the universe and nature to take place appropriately ("We have created everything in due measure" 54/al-Qamar, 49.; "…We have ensured that various plants grow there in a balanced way." 15/Hijr: 19). When we look at the other verses in the Qur'an, it is understood that man was created as a caliph and exalted, and nature was given to his use. In addition, people have been given important responsibilities and duties in terms of the protection of nature and ecological balance. It is stated that human beings will be responsible for the deterioration of the ecological balance as well ("We have made human beings a valuable and skilful creature. …We have made them superior to most of the creatures we have created." 17/Isra: 70; "There has been deterioration in the land and sea because of what people have done

4 Tanner/Mitchell 2002.

with their own hands…" 30/ Rum: 41).[5] For this reason, it is man's duty to maintain the natural balance within the limits of creation. To sum up, it can be said that the basis of the human–nature relationship from the perspective of Islam is based on the principles mentioned in these verses; in other words, the principles of *tawhid* and that Allah creates a balance (*mizan*) in the universe and nature in creation. The duty of the believer is to act responsibly in line with these principles and not to own nature, but to take care of it.

Some basic principles that human beings, who are held responsible for maintaining the balance in nature, must comply with in this process are also stated in the basic sources of Islam. In Islam, avoidance of waste is recommended as a method of conserving natural resources, and waste is described as an action that the Creator dislikes. ('Eat and drink, but do not waste! For Allah does not love the wasteful' 7/Araf: 31). Humans are encouraged not to squander resources vulgarly, to use the resources appropriately, taking into account the rights of the poor, and to act moderately in this regard. (Enam: 141).

It is emphasised that the Creator built an order into the natural environment and that this order should not be disturbed ("Do not make mischief in the world after its correction." 7/Araf: 56). There are various verses in addition to the above that point to the importance of preserving the natural environment and the delicate balance therein. Again, in line with protecting the environment and transferring it to future generations, there are principles laid down by Islam on the protection of plants and animals, the encouragement of tree planting, the promotion of environmental cleanliness and the prevention of air, water and soil pollution.[6]

Drawing from the theological precepts enshrined within Islamic scripture, specifically the Qur'an and prophetic traditions (*hadiths*), we can delineate a comprehensive perspective on the natural environment and its inherent virtues. The recognition that the natural environment is a divine gift, ordained by God for human utilisation, is central to this viewpoint. Within this framework, humanity is entrusted with the stewardship of the environment, which necessitates responsible custodianship characterised by conscientious usage and gratitude towards the bestower of blessings.

5 al-Mu'minin 2006.

6 Martı 2018 / Ayten 2021.

The imperative to utilise natural resources judiciously, eschewing wastefulness and extravagance, is integral to Islamic teachings. Therefore, emphasis is placed on mindful consumption, wherein resources are utilised in a manner that respects their intrinsic value and conserves their longevity. Moreover, the Islamic ethos encompasses a profound sense of reverence for the sanctity of nature, mandating the safeguarding of its beauty and myriad of resources. This conscientious custodianship extends beyond mere preservation, encompassing a proactive commitment to ensuring the sustenance and flourishing of future generations through the prudent management of natural assets.

In essence, the Islamic perspective espouses a holistic ethos of environmental stewardship, underpinned by the principles of gratitude, moderation and preservation. Through this lens, the natural environment is perceived not merely as a repository of resources for human exploitation, but as a sacred trust imbued with divine wisdom, which is deserving of reverence, protection and sustainable utilisation for the betterment of both present and future generations.

The human–nature relationship of Islam is evaluated by theologians in a moral framework.[7] This chapter also deals with the issue from a moral point of view. In this context, environmental ethics can be considered attitudes and behaviour formed in the triangle of nature, human experience and reason, as in general morality. At this point, humans innately have the ability to distinguish between good and bad and to realise the basic problems of the natural environment and what needs to be done to find a solution to them. They have the capacity to be aware of the technological advances they have achieved thanks to their minds and the damage they cause to the environment. What is needed is for humans to show a determination in this direction and to keep awareness alive and spread it to generations through education.

While examining the human–nature relationship from an Islamic point of view, researchers should handle the issue within the framework of the belief of *tawhid*. God is the creator of man and nature. It is very important for people to evaluate the natural environment

7 Nasr 1982 / Bayrakdar 1992 / Martı 2018 / Ayten 2021.

from this perspective, to see natural beauty and resources as a trust given to them by Allah, to protect and watch over them, and to look at environmental problems from this perspective and in terms of interpreting the human–nature relationship with an Islamic dimension. In the practical field, while the effect of religiosity is effective in developing an approach of entrusting the environment to believers, the same effect is limited in terms of environmental behaviour. The effect of religiosity in developing behaviour to protect the environment is more intense in not wasting basic natural resources such as bread, water and energy, which are also inherent in traditional culture. On the other hand, the effect of religiosity on the development of active environmental behaviour is weaker. There may be a number of reasons for this, both mentioned and not mentioned here. These interesting subjects are issues to be studied and await researchers who will work in different fields of the social sciences.

## Analysis of Current Situations among Muslims in terms of Environmental Dominion and Environmental Stewardship: Assessment of Findings from Various Studies

A series of empirical inquiries, conducted across varying temporal contexts, has been undertaken to assess the environmental orientations and behaviour exhibited by Muslim individuals.[8] Within this scholarly endeavour, environmental orientations have been examined through a bifurcated lens, characterised by the conceptual delineations of 'Environmental Dominion' and 'Environmental Stewardship'. Concurrently, forms of environmental behaviour have been methodologically explained according to two distinct sub-dimensions, namely 'Waste Management' and 'Active Environmentalism'. In light of the nuanced frameworks articulated across these studies, the environmental orientations and pro-environmental behaviour demonstrated by Muslim individuals have been subject to rigorous evaluation. Through a synthesis of findings derived from these discrete investigations, a comprehensive understanding of the

8 Ayten 2010 / Ayten/Hussain 2017 / Ayten 2018 / Ayten/Hussain/Farhan 2024.

environmental consciousness and actions within Muslim communities has been sought to illuminate the complex interplay between religious tenets, cultural dynamics, and ecological concerns.

In the aforementioned studies, the construct of environmental dominion is characterised by a set of beliefs emphasising human primacy and utilitarianism vis-à-vis the natural environment. This ideological stance posits that humans are the rightful rulers of the natural world, and despite awareness of potential environmental harm, they are justified in leveraging technological advancements for personal gain. Additionally, nature is perceived as valuable solely insofar as it serves human interests, with an implicit endorsement of its inexhaustible exploitation. Furthermore, certain beings within the natural realm, such as insects and vermin, are deemed superfluous and devoid of utility. The doctrine of environmental dominion also sanctions the notion that human intervention to the detriment of nature is permissible when deemed advantageous.

Conversely, the construct of environmental stewardship embodies a contrasting set of principles rooted in reverence and custodianship towards the natural world. The conception of the universe, replete with its aesthetic splendour, as a sacred trust (*amanah*) reflecting divine creation, is central to this ethos. Within this paradigm, nature is not merely a resource to be exploited but a manifestation of God's existence, warranting protection irrespective of its utility to humans. Moreover, the doctrine of environmental stewardship advocates lifestyle modifications aimed at minimising ecological harm, thus underscoring the imperative for individuals to adapt their behaviour to align with the principles of environmental preservation.

Moreover, waste management constitutes an array of environmentally conscious behaviour aimed at resource conservation and sustainability. These practices encompass judicious utilisation of water, food and energy, alongside the adoption of energy-efficient technologies in both domestic and professional settings. Additionally, waste management entails active participation in recycling initiatives aimed at mitigating the environmental degradation stemming from resource depletion and pollution.

On the other hand, active environmentalism represents proactive engagement in advocacy and activism aimed at addressing environmental challenges on a systemic level. This entails attending informational sessions on topics such as climate change and en-

vironmental crises, as well as actively disseminating information through various channels, such as distributing brochures and delivering speeches to raise awareness among the public. Furthermore, active environmentalism encompasses participation in demonstrations and protests against environmental pollution and advocating for sustainable policies and practices on a broader societal scale.

Table 1. Arithmetic Mean Scores Indicating Individuals' Environmental Orientations

| **Dimensions of Environmental Orientations** | **Years** | **M** |
|---|---|---|
| **Environmental dominion** | 2010 (N = 243) | 2.43 |
| | 2017 (N = 252) | 2.42 |
| | 2018 (N = 292) | 2.55 |
| | 2024 (N = 355) | 2.81 |
| **Environmental stewardship** | 2010 (N = 243) | 4.54 |
| | 2017 (N = 252) | 4.58 |
| | 2018 (N = 292) | 4.51 |
| | 2024 (N = 355) | 4.63 |

Table 2. Arithmetic Mean Scores Indicating Individuals' Pro-Environmental Behaviour

| **Dimensions of Pro-Environmental Behaviour** | **Years** | **M** |
|---|---|---|
| **Waste management** | 2010 (N = 243) | 4.18 |
| | 2017 (N = 252) | 3.98 |
| | 2018 (N = 292) | 3.91 |
| | 2024 (N = 355) | 4.07 |
| **Active environmentalism** | 2010 (N = 243) | 2.50 |
| | 2017 (N = 252) | 2.34 |
| | 2018 (N = 292) | 2.30 |
| | 2024 (N = 355) | 2.30 |

Two contrasting perspectives exist regarding the individual's relationship with nature, which can be delineated as possession and trust. These divergent paradigms play a pivotal role in elucidating individuals' proclivity towards environmentally conscious behaviour. Drawing from the findings of four longitudinal studies conducted at distinct intervals and encompassing diverse Muslim cohorts, we can discern that respondents exhibit an average level of environmental dominion orientation. Conversely, environmental stewardship orientation is notably more pronounced, registering at a substantially higher level, with scores averaging nearly 4.5 out of 5 across the years spanning from 2010 to 2024. This signifies a prevailing inclination among Muslim individuals towards concepts intrinsic to environmental stewardship, such as the recognition of nature's inherent sanctity as a sacred trust and the acknowledgment of human responsibility in safeguarding nature, including the willingness to adapt lifestyle practices to mitigate harm to the environment.

Regarding individuals' pro-environmental behaviour, the amalgamated findings from the aforementioned studies divulge that inclinations towards waste management behaviour, encompassing practices such as water, food, and energy conservation, as well as the utilisation of energy-saving technologies, surpass those towards active environmentalism. This trend persists over the temporal continuum spanning from 2010 to 2024. Evidently, there exists a predilection among individuals for action geared towards resource conservation and sustainability, compared to more overt forms of environmental advocacy and activism, such as attending conferences on environmental issues and participating in demonstrations against environmental crises.

The findings from the aforementioned studies, exemplified by the β coefficients derived from regression models, illuminate nuanced relationships between religiosity and environmental attitudes. Specifically, the research reveals that religiosity correlates positively with inclinations towards environmental stewardship and waste management, while demonstrating a negative correlation with tendencies towards environmental dominion. Furthermore, the investigation indicates that religiosity exerts no discernible effect on active environmentalism. For further elaboration and comprehensive insights, readers are referred to the works of Ayten

(2010), Ayten & Hussain (2017), Ayten (2018), Çiçek & Ayten (2023) as well as Ayten, Hussain and Farhan (2024).

## General Evaluation and Discussion

In the foundational sources of Islam, as with other Abrahamic religions, there is frequent emphasis on a sense of responsibility towards the natural environment and thus environmentally friendly behaviour. However, the translation of these teachings into the lives of individuals is also associated with various other variables such as education, lifestyle, socioeconomic status and ideological attitudes towards life. Therefore, research has revealed discrepancies between the ideal situation and the actual implementation of these teachings, influenced by a range of factors. In this chapter, this process is examined from a psychosocial perspective within the framework of empirical research.

In this chapter, the examination of the human–nature relationship within an Islamic framework is grounded in the belief of *tawhid*. *Tawhid*, the concept of the Oneness of God, serves as the foundation for understanding the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. According to Islamic teachings, God is the creator of both humankind and nature, who established a delicate balance within the universe. This perspective underscores the importance of viewing the natural environment as a divine trust bestowed upon people by Allah. It involves recognising natural beauty and resources as manifestations of God's creation, thereby instilling a sense of responsibility to safeguard and preserve them. Furthermore, it prompts individuals to approach environmental issues with sensitivity and to interpret the human–nature relationship through an Islamic lens.

The empirical findings discussed in this chapter shed light on the correlation between religiosity and pro-environmental behaviour, particularly environmental stewardship. Religiosity emerges as a significant driver in fostering attitudes that prioritise the protection and conservation of nature. Individuals with higher levels of religiosity tend to perceive nature as a sacred trust, admitting the presence of God within it, and thus feel compelled to safeguard it for future generations. Conversely, the inclination to view hu-

mans as dominators of nature, solely exploiting its resources for personal gain, diminishes among those with greater religiosity. This behavioural pattern aligns with the Islamic principle that emphasises the ultimate ownership of the natural world by the Supreme Creator.

The discussion on pro-environmental behaviour is categorised into two groups: waste avoidance and active environmental awareness. Waste avoidance encompasses practices such as judicious use of resources like bread, water and energy, as well as measures to reduce paper waste. On the other hand, active environmental awareness entails engaging in activities such as disseminating information about environmental issues, participating in tree planting initiatives or supporting related campaigns, adopting environmentally friendly consumption habits and participating in demonstrations that address global environmental challenges like climate change. The distinction between these categories considers both the extent of the environmental burden imposed by behaviour and their direct contribution to nature preservation.

The tendency of individuals to engage in environmentally friendly behaviour, such as waste reduction, surpasses their inclination towards active environmental engagement. This phenomenon can be explained through various factors. Firstly, pro-environmental behaviour, such as prudent resource usage (e.g. bread, water and energy conservation), are deeply entrenched within cultural norms, thereby facilitating their adoption into daily practices. Secondly, the religious underpinning of waste avoidance reinforces individuals' motivation in this regard. Additionally, the economic benefits associated with such behaviour play a significant role in their adoption. Conversely, active environmental behaviour, encompassing more demanding activities like environmental education and advocacy, necessitate greater investments of time and resources.

Recent small-scale research conducted over the past fifteen years has revealed stagnation in this regard, particularly concerning waste reduction and overall environmental awareness. This stagnation can be attributed, in part, to the inverse relationship between economic development and waste reduction behaviour; as individuals' economic prosperity increases, so too may their consumption and subsequent generation of waste. To sustain environmental consciousness amidst economic progress, instilling values of conscious

consumption and environmental ethics within the education system is imperative.

Religiosity emerges as a significant determinant in shaping individuals' attitudes towards environmental stewardship. However, its impact on active environmental behaviour appears to be more limited. While religiosity positively influences behaviour aligned with traditional cultural norms, such as waste reduction, its effect on active environmental engagement, including participation in environmental protests, is less pronounced. The complex interplay between religiosity and environmentalism underscores the need for qualitative investigations to elucidate this relationship further.

The discrepancy between the conveyance of religious teachings and the adoption of active environmental behaviour may be attributed to the lag in updating religious knowledge to address contemporary environmental challenges. Additionally, factors such as economic considerations, cultural influences, consumption habits and awareness of environmental issues contribute to individuals' attitudes towards waste reduction.

In this chapter, a discourse emphasising moral responsibility and trust is advanced. It underscores the importance of integrating environmental education into religious teachings to foster environmental awareness and sensitivity across society. Religious educators play a pivotal role in imparting environmental consciousness to students, and incorporating environmental education into religious curricula can be instrumental in this endeavour. Moreover, religious broadcasting institutions can promote publications that advocate harmony between humans and nature, thereby fostering a culture of environmental stewardship.

As a global society, it is imperative to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of consumption that is balanced, prudent and sustainable. This awareness should be nurtured at various levels, encompassing not only individuals but also institutions, such as families, governmental bodies and educational institutions. Moreover, embedding this consciousness within educational systems, especially within the framework of religious education, through both explicit and implicit curricular elements, is paramount. Engaging in further systematic research in this domain would be beneficial, particularly given the intrinsic possessive tendencies inherent in human nature.

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*Stephan Pruchniewicz, Rhea Rothgerber and Naime Cakir-Mattner*

# "They won't get anywhere with this position!"

## Reflections on the "attitude" of religion and ethics teachers

The role and significance of religion and ethics teaching in the various types of schools in Germany has been the subject of constant debate and changing perspectives for many decades.[1] In addition to existing theological and religious education considerations, political and ideological reasons have certainly also played a role in this respect.

It was also necessary to take account of the heterogeneity and plurality in classrooms and, in accordance with Article 7, Paragraph 4 of the Basic Law, to offer religious education or religious studies lessons—such as on Islam—to other religious communities as far as possible.[2] At the same time, the increasing diversity of topics in education has always been accompanied by attempts to create cooperative offerings out of that abundance of topics. Sometimes this

1 The calls to abandon religious education at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the gradual introduction of ethics lessons in the individual federal states and the establishment of subjects such as LER in Brandenburg, which were due to the specific conditions of East Germany in 1992, can be cited as examples of the way in which these discourses led to readjustment on this issue. In this context, reference should be made to Islamic religious education. This has been particularly evident since the 2000s in the debates and efforts to introduce Islamic religious education in schools in various federal states. The introduction of Islamic religious education has a long history. However, relevant progress has only become visible since the convening of the German Islam Conference in 2006. Since then, however, the debate on denominationally orientated Islamic education has not been concluded.

2 Federal Ministry of Justice 2022, § 7 Abs. 4 GG.

has been done out of conviction in terms of content, but much more often due to a shortage of content or an emergency situation. In all these processes of change, one common tendency can be identified, in a somewhat simplified way: for a long time, the more or less openly expressed self-interests of the churches and religious communities with regard to religious education were in the foreground and the movement for ethics education saw itself as one that fought precisely against this religious appropriation of the public education sector, but beyond these struggles, the pupils and their needs moved into the focus of the discussion.

The following questions were at the forefront of the discussion:

1. What religious, ethical and ideological education do pupils need in their respective living environments?
2. To what extent do the pedagogical and content-related efforts of the subjects involved contribute to the overall task of public education with regard to peaceful social coexistence?

These and similar questions, in combination with a society that is becoming more religiously and culturally pluralistic per se[3], have increasingly led to attempts at cooperative collaboration, particularly in the religious spectrum, especially in urban regions. In addition to denominationally cooperative approaches, such as those in Baden-Württemberg or North Rhine-Westphalia, this happened most extensively in the so-called Hamburg model, which is now known as religious education for all (German: Religionsunterricht für alle – Rufa 2.0). All of these models and projects have been extensively evaluated and researched from different perspectives in recent years. Corresponding teaching materials have been designed and tested. These efforts have been flanked by broad-based student surveys on the importance and impact of ethics and religious education.[4] In contrast, the role of teachers in this process of change has received little attention, at least if one assumes that the establishment of possibly obligatory further training on this topic is not already proof of attention. Even today, the consequences of this changed or changing educational landscape for the relevant teacher

3 Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2024.

4 For example: Schweitzer 2018.

training courses or the traineeship period are only being drawn slowly or sporadically.[5]

However, if there is a will to prepare future teachers for their task in a no longer uniformly denominational or mono-religious teaching environment during their studies and traineeship, the question arises as to the content of such preparation. The same naturally also applies to teachers who have already been in the profession (for a long time) and who would like to adapt to changes in their professional field with the help of the further training courses on offer. In addition to the suggestions on the pedagogy (German: Didaktik) and methodology of religious education in heterogeneous learning groups, which still characterise the majority of the training and further education measures offered, the term "position" (German: Haltung) is also increasingly appearing in the research literature on religious education. Position seems to be the aspect on the part of the teacher to which particular reference must be made in this context.[6]

However, the term itself is not used uniformly; rather, the terms position and habitus are sometimes used synonymously in relevant publications.[7]

Generally speaking, the psychological term attitude (German: Attitüde) refers to the relatively stable, conscious and situational positions, opinions and orientations (German: Einstellung) of a person towards thematic references, objects and other people, etc., which are cognitively accessible to the respective bearer and can be confused and changed by external influences. However, this potential, cognitively accessible changeability of an attitude may be more difficult if conscious convictions are believed with internalised certainty and defended against other positions. In this respect, such attitudes that are resistant to conviction, coupled with an absolute claim to validity, would be a hindrance, especially with regard to religious education in an interreligious context, if the aim there is to meet the different faith orientations of students with empathy and appreciation in the sense of a professional pedagogical position. Here, the teachers' "attitude of conviction" should take a back seat in order to give the necessary space to understanding the students' faith and

5 Cakir-Mattner et. al. 2022, 47 f.

6 Altuntas 2014, 46. Also see: Mendl 2015, 37–50 / Riegger/Heil 2017.

7 Gaus 2023. Also see: Altmeyer/Grümme 2018.

value orientations in a non-judgemental way. In this respect, against the background of a general understanding of attitudes, future religious educators should be sensitised to the awareness and thematisation of attitudes and their potential effects in the interreligious educational setting in order to give space to an open position towards what remains different in oneself.

While attitudes are usually cognitively accessible, subject-related positions and related "opinions" that can be changed through insight, an incorporated habitus and its "distinctive characteristics" in the Bourdieuian sense are to be understood as the result of a psychosocial as well as social and cultural imprint within the framework of the primary socialisation sphere of family/milieu. In concrete terms, this means that the acquisition of habitus takes place in the course of the cultural and material imprinting of a family, which constitutes the habitual characteristics of a person through identity formation.[8]

This means that the sociological term "habitus", introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, describes a societal/social classification or differentiation feature that is understood as the "incorporation of class position", including the associated symbolic capital that the respective social subject habitually appropriates as incorporated capital of origin against the background of their socio-cultural lifeworld, which manifests itself in a related lifestyle (taste, aesthetic attitude, behavioural and mental attitudes, etc.) and which they use to more or less consciously identify themselves as belonging to a certain social group.[9]

In this respect, people from different cultural and religious backgrounds each have a specific, religiously connoted "ethnicised habitus", which must be recognised as a strategy for reflection and action on the part of (inter)religious practitioners—both in training and teaching—in the sense of habitus and diversity sensitivity. This must therefore be taken into account with regard to the students entrusted to them as well as with regard to the teachers' own habitual orientation in the context of the pedagogical debate. This addresses a "professional habitus" in the context of teacher training,

8 Bourdieu 1982, 39 f./166/175.

9 ibid.

through which the prerequisites for profession-specific habitus formation towards a "specific professional ethos" are laid down by a teacher addressing and becoming aware of their own habitual peculiarities.[10]

In principle, however, it can be stated that the reflections on habitus usually associated with the name Pierre Bourdieu, as the model of mediation between culture and practice in the sense of human dispositions that function as patterns of thought, perception and judgement in everyday life, have only hesitantly found their way into theological considerations connoted with religious education in the past. If the topic of position or habitus does emerge, it is always where religious education is discussed or formatted from the perspective of interdenominational and interreligious demands on teaching and learning content.[11] With a view to the responsibility of religious education, for example with regard to questions of educational justice, Stefan Altmeyer and Bernhard Grümme, for example, present initial considerations on the reception of Bourdieu's concept of habitus in religious education.[12] The establishment of a form of religious education capable of addressing heterogeneity is a central concern for them and their resulting approach to Bourdieu is more than purposeful. They rightly point out that religious education teachers are also actors in the social space and that their milieu-specific or habitual influences have a significant impact on their teaching activities. Altmeyer and Grümme thus set themselves apart from other common assumptions, not only in religious education, which place the question of the significance of positions in teaching/learning settings primarily in the field of professionalism research.[13] The question of the significance of the phenomenon of position or habitus in educational processes, especially in educational arrangements with religious implications, must not be negotiated at the level of a professionalisation offensive for teachers. The phenomenon of the religious, which has become increasingly multifaceted in recent decades, does not offer a sufficient target area for a

10 Becker-Lenz/Müller 2009.

11 Eppenstein 2022, 234. Also see: Herwartz-Emden/Waburg 2012, 479 / Projektgruppe "Interreligiöse Religionspädagogik" 2020.

12 Altmeyer/Grümme 2018, 248–267.

13 Gaus 2023, 25–49.

professionalisation strategy, not least because the teachers to be professionalised always remain part of the phenomenon for which they are then to be trained and further educated. It is precisely this circumstance that Pierre Bourdieu's research refers to in many places, as he repeatedly shows in various contexts that social differences are consolidated and reproduced precisely through the educational sector in terms of the symbolically mediated capital in the respective social background.[14] The different positioning of those involved in educational processes in the social space justifies the different approaches to shaping it. Educational institutions will not succeed in changing or minimising this inequality.[15] This circumstance is theologically challenging for two reasons: firstly, because belonging to a particular religious or denominational community may cement one's position in society and thus prevent change; secondly, because the structurally determined classification of people in a society often represents a historically outdated state, the justification for which often also has religious implications. However, this is fundamentally at odds with a sustainable form of theological anthropology.[16] Such a form of anthropology cannot be conceived without the assumption of the general equality of human beings before God and thus also in human interaction. Thus, Altmeyer and Grümme rightly conclude at the end of their essay that:

> Religious education is thus challenged, in the spirit of ideology critique, to deal self-reflexively with its involvement in hegemonic contexts of normativity and power and only then to actively do justice to its involvement in the complex relationships of religious education and enlightenment. Therein lie perspectives for a religious education that sees itself led to its conceptual limits in view of the interdependencies of religious plurality and social divergence. Bourdieu has not yet fulfilled his potential, especially in the struggle to establish a religious education capable of heterogeneity.[17]

However, if the discourse on the position or habitus of religious education teachers is not to be limited to a debate on questions

14 Bourdieu 1982.

15 Scherr 2018, 465–469.

16 Koran 49, 13 / Takim 2016, 11.

17 Altmeyer / Grümme 2018, 263 f. Transl. Caroline Beierle.

of educational justice and equal opportunities, an attempt must be made to grasp and describe the processes of change that are sought at the habitual level, and which may also occur unconsciously. In other words, the following is an attempt to take a closer look at Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic capital", as the interaction of social, economic and cultural capital on which prestige and social status are based, and to ask why this conglomerate so tenaciously shapes everyday life and the educational landscape. The deliberate use of the English term "attitude" in the following initially seems like a play on words to emphasise the claim of this being something new or at least different. However, what is actually new about the reflections on "attitude" is a philosophical positioning that does not take the classical route via the Aristotelian concept of hexis (as a position of choice),[18] but instead starts with the help of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations". The focus here is on Wittgenstein's idea of linguistic action as cultural games. In the words of Clemens Sedmak,[19] cultural games can be understood as follows:

> Cultural games are determined by (also a linguistic grammar and) a social grammar and a "grammar of belief"; the player's beliefs shape the game (…). Beliefs, the "grammar of belief", are also the final, inviolable foundation of cultural games, the point at which the spade hits the rock and bends back (PU 217).[20]

This reference initially seems naïve if it is understood as equating the concept of position with the "grammar of belief" in order to then designate it as "attitude". Added to this is perhaps the theological seductiveness that could arise from the term "belief". What is decisive, however, is the categorization into cultural games, i.e. everything that exists in a certain social space in a broad sense as proven rules of (communicative) interaction: the functioning of a society according to rules that simply exist and are observed.

In this setting, the grammar of belief initially describes something like the motivational level of participation in the social game. "Worldview assumptions, life-sustaining basic convictions, moral values and religious beliefs form the motor and the moving force

18 Kurbacher / Wüschner 2016.

19 Sedmak 1999.

20 ibid., 176. Transl. Caroline Beierle.

of social life, which cannot be reduced to a set of instructions."[21] All of this together forms the pattern of individual "grammars of belief" in a highly individual and, at the same time, highly connectable way. The question of the extent to which the "grammars" are (pre-)shaped by the cultural games played and to what extent the "grammars" shape and determine the cultural game in the first place must, of course, be asked.[22] It seems crucial to summarise the motivational level beyond the boundaries of individual aspects. In other words, the challenge lies in the search for a motive that is more than the sum of individual motives from areas such as morality, religion, tradition and culture, which have become embedded in them as possible facets of the "grammars". Such a superordinate level of motives can be identified in line with Rahel Jaeggi's reflections on the phenomenon of life forms. She describes life forms as "complexly structured bundles (or ensembles) of social practices aimed at solving problems that are themselves historically contextualized and normatively constituted."[23] The point here is the emphasis on the reference to practice, which becomes even clearer when Jaeggi describes the success of a way of life: "Such a perspective makes the criterion of success less substantive aspects of content and more formal criteria that focus on the rationality and success of the process thus described as an ethical-social learning process."[24] The meaning of a social practice that follows the rules of the respective "cultural game" played within a way of life, driven by the "grammar of belief", then arises through its actual practicability. If this no longer comes to light for the individual, the rules of the social game and ultimately also the "grammar of belief" begin to falter. The possibility of remaining part of society and thus part of the "cultural game" solely through certain practices motivates these practices; social participation or participation in a certain way of life is the determining motive, which is initially independent of any substantive interpretation or foundation.

Up to this point, the setting appears highly static, as the focus so far has tended to be on the singular form of life. However, societal

21 Sedmak 1999, 176. Transl. Caroline Beierle.

22 ibid., 176 f.

23 Jaeggi 2023, 58. Transl. Caroline Beierle.

24 ibid. Tansl. Caroline Beierle.

or social reality only ever recognises life forms in the plural. From this perspective, being human always means participating in different forms of life that exist at the same time, which are not always strictly separated from one another. Rather, there are grey areas, fluid transitions and mutual dependencies between the forms of life and thus tensions that the individual must integrate into his or her existence in a moderating way. With the addition of this experience, namely that the boundaries of a form of life can never be concretely determined and that there can be no all-encompassing form of life in a society alone, the question of the criteria and reasons that lead to the change or disappearance of a form of life becomes more acute. Jaeggi's approach of linking the internal critical capacity of a way of life to its practicability seems highly plausible. This means that the life form itself is able to react self-critically to changes and to change. If this possibility remains unused, a process begins that leads to the complete disappearance of the life form: It is no longer needed as a coping mechanism within society as a whole. The life forms therefore react actively to the changes in society as a whole, as part of which they always contribute to these processes of change. In other words, people's desire for a sustainable practice in everyday life dynamises the critical examination of the normative, cultural, religious and ethical implications and "habits" within that way of life. Reasons for this can be the emergence of competing ways of life, which are accompanied by new social challenges in economic, political, technical, ecological, etc. areas.

Based on this, the aspects discussed so far can be categorised as follows: the basic phenomenon on the individual human level is the "grammar of belief", which experiences validity and resonance on a second level in the various forms of life in which the individual is involved in a formative and participatory way. This second level is characterised by the "cultural games" that enable processual action, communication and reflection within and between the forms of life. The totality of these movements can then be described as the culture of society as a whole. Bearing in mind the problems associated with the concept of culture, it is used here solely as a descriptive term for society as a whole, the boundaries of which are themselves difficult to grasp and have a clearly osmotic character. What is crucial to understanding this classification is the assumption of a permanent reciprocal dynamic between the individual levels, which, as

already mentioned above, is causally due to coping with the practice of life.

However, this does no more than attempt a structured view of a basically monadic society that has been cut out of the diverse totality of ways of life that form society. This assumes a framework that seems fixed, but does not exist in this form; thus, however, the "grammar of belief", the ways of life and "cultural games" do not have a contoured frame of orientation either. It is therefore to Clemens Sedmak's credit that, in his 1999 essay "The cultural game of watching the game"[25], he further developed this initial analysis interculturally on the basis of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and his terminology.

This encounter and reciprocal interpenetration of cultural systems requires learning processes from those involved or affected. Possible rapprochements and possibly necessary arrangements for living together always involve understanding and learning previously foreign cultural practices and playing (still) foreign "cultural games". Ultimately, in such encounters, the practicability of the ways of life affected is fundamentally put to the test. In his considerations, Clemens Sedmak has made it clear that the structure of the "cultural games" played in the forms of life are basically designed to be learnable, but this is accompanied by an exciting shift. By no means, according to Sedmak, do games and players remain unaffected by the encounters. In other words, a player who is used to moving safely within their own cultural game, and who can generally trust their own grammar of belief or does not see it called into question, can learn the "cultural game" of another culture—but not without changing it and their own traditional one.[26]

The crucial question for the term of attitude is now whether the processes of change that cannot really be questioned within intercultural discourses also reach the grammar of belief. In other words, how deeply do the changed rules of the game and the way of playing according to them penetrate the "player"? This question arises all the more sharply if, as described above, the impetus for change is essentially attributed to pragmatic reasons—precisely in order to pre-

25 Sedmak 1999.

26 ibid., 176.

serve the forms of life concerned. According to Sedmak, a reciprocal learning process between "cultural games" is possible in principle, because

> At a deeper level, common human contexts of action [...] can be identified; in every culture there are ritualized cultural games for the basic processes of life: Food intake, reproduction, cult, hierarchy, education. On this basis, the basic function of foreign customs can be identified.[27]

In addition to the possibility of identification and the resulting ability to play along in an inherently foreign "cultural game", the new players also change the established rule system of the "game" in which they now participate. In a first step, they may only play the game a little differently according to the existing rules in order to adapt it to their traditional playing habits in this area. In a second step, however, all players can also change the rules based on the new heterogeneous starting situation of the game. Here, too, the changes are made for pragmatic reasons—the game should or must simply be played. The experiences the individuals have in the process then have a changing effect on their own game and give the traditional cultural framework a new character. In this sense, attitude can be understood as a phenomenon that is deeply committed to and determined by practice. Changes in attitude can therefore be understood as the result of reciprocal coping strategies and mechanisms that process experiences on a cognitive and emotional level from encounters between forms of life shaped by certain "cultural games". The extent to which these shifts and instances of reformatting of human deep grammar can be empirically proven, and the extent to which they can be initiated in the context of schools and educational processes (especially in religious and ethics lessons) through conscious learning through encounters or dialogical learning should be examined more closely in the future from at least two perspectives: firstly, with regard to changes in one's own religious beliefs embedded in the "grammar of belief", the character of which may be more kaleidoscopic and less elaborately theological. Accordingly, teachers encounter their students as representatives of their own beliefs and not primarily as ambassadors of the institutionally tangible faith of

27 Sedmak 1999, 181. Transl. Caroline Beierle.

a religious community. On the other hand, with recourse to Bourdieu's theories, the question of power and power asymmetries in the social space of education must also be raised—to what extent do the existing power dynamics between teachers and students, especially with regard to their culturally stabilising religious and theological implications, influence possible and possibly necessary changes?

All these empirical studies on the attitudes of teachers and learners, which have yet to be conducted, are based on the fundamental assumption that social practice, in the sense of the dynamics described above, determines the teaching/learning processes in everyday school life to a much greater extent than the theoretical superstructure of cooperative teaching models available to date perceives. What needs to be shown in the future is the extent to which it is possible to make those affected aware of the unconscious changes in human deep grammar, which guides perception and action, that ultimately result from socially provoked practical pressure. Through such "awareness", attitude becomes a variable in educational theory reflections, which can be used as an ever-fluid resource in the overall social "game" of life forms and its reflection in the educational context.

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*Bülent Şenay*

# Conscience (al-Wijdān) and Civility (at-Tamaddon) in Intercultural Teacher Education

## An Islamic Perspective in Hypermodern Risk Society

> *"Have they not travelled throughout the land so their hearts may reason, and their ears may listen? Indeed, it is not the eyes that are blind, but it is the hearts in the chests that grow blind."*
>
> *The Qur'an, 22:46*

We no longer inhabit postmodern cultures but have transitioned to hypermodern ones characterised by an accelerated form of modernity within risk societies. In this increasingly globalised and hypermodern context, the role of educators has evolved beyond traditional boundaries. Preparing teachers to navigate classrooms marked by profound cultural, religious and linguistic hyper-diversity has become essential. This requires a more comprehensive and sophisticated approach to teacher education, one that responds effectively to the complexities of the contemporary world.

In contemporary hypermodern discourse, the demands for and the promises of change dominate much of the public narrative. While many people advocate change and political figures pledge to deliver it, the precise nature of this "change" often remains ambiguous. What, specifically, do people desire, and what are politicians committing to achieve? Although no universal definition of "change" exists, certain underlying assumptions commonly shape these discussions. Chief among them is the notion that change entails replacing an undesirable current state with a preferred alternative. Implicit in this assumption is the belief, often held by those advocating change, that their perspective embodies the ideal alternative, while the existing state reflects the views of those who must adapt. In essence, *calls for change usually imply an expectation that others conform to the perspectives of those demanding it*. Everyone

is dug in, entrenched and unwilling to move from their ideological position; at the same time, everyone is talking about, demanding and even promising change. What kind of change is possible when no one thinks they need to change and everyone thinks "others" need to change? The belief that others are "the problem" hinders change and contributes to much of the incivility and polarisation within our societies today.[1]

Hypermodern life is marked by rapid change and an emphasis on individualistic, competitive survival strategies, often undermining collective progress and civility. This environment fosters polarisation and diminishes social cohesion. Religion, like politics, evokes strong emotional responses and deeply held convictions, with many perceiving their beliefs as absolute and dismissing opposing views as flawed. Such attitudes are often accompanied by a fear of moral "corruption" through engagement with differing perspectives. This mindset, while increasingly pervasive, reflects prior incivility rather than being inherent to religion. Civility, rooted in moral consciousness and ethical principles, transcends codified laws, thus serving as a vital framework for respectful coexistence.[2]

Civility faces significant challenges in contemporary times, even as the 21st century underscores the interconnectedness of global populations, fostering unity and the need for meaningful dialogue. While societies have become more multicultural, true intercultural engagement remains limited. Hypermodernity, marked by rapid change and complexity, highlights the need to move from coexistence in parallel multicultural spheres to interculturalism, where cultures actively share and recognise their uniqueness. This hypermodern era, shaped by post-secular, post-rational urban life, amplifies the role of religion, particularly in influencing emotions that are central to the formation and expression of individual identities.

The main arguments of the concept of hypermodernity are the intensification of values, the cultures of excess and an overwhelming cascade of products that result in consumption. Hypermodernity is characterised by an emphasis on individualism, the pursuit of self-identity, the prioritisation of aesthetics, exponential marketisation,

1 Nave 2018, 10.

2 Newell 2019, 1–2.

hyper-shows and hyper-events, culminating in what is often referred to as aesthetic capitalism—a peak manifestation of capitalism itself. The prefix *hyper* signifies the intensification of values rooted in postmodernity, now amplified to extremes of consumption and individualism. Furthermore, hypermodernity highlights the rapidity and intensity of collective activities, which contribute to a pervasive sense of accelerated time. As such, hypermodernity provides a more apt conceptual framework for understanding the heightened pace of temporal experience in contemporary society.[3] We live in what Paul Virilio, in his concept of *dromology*, describes as a society of speed and acceleration, which emphasises the pivotal role of velocity in shaping history. In this framework, the city becomes merely a transient waypoint along a synoptic trajectory, similar to ancient military glacis, ridge roads, frontiers or riverbanks, where the observer's perspective is intrinsically tied to the speed of movement. Within this context, all cities emerge as inherently uncertain spaces.[4]

In our *cities of uncertainties*, *hypermodernity* resides in *the realm of the "in-between"*—a liminal space, a purgatory, a transient domain that perhaps predates the division between objects and subjects and can only be articulated and understood in the context of the specific historical conditions we currently inhabit. This state of "in-betweenness" induces a form of *mental disorientation concerning life itself.* Religious extremists and hypermodern Islamophobes alike cling to monolithic and absolutist categories, each forged from their respective sources—both religious and secular. This hypermodern analysis is grounded in what might be termed the "*uncertainty principle*", which links the logic of speed to the intensification and complex interconnections of contemporary organisations and institutions. The hypermodern city is thus a city of *risks*, depression and frustration. Its cause, as Virilio posits, lies in what he refers to as "technological fundamentalism". "*Just as there is religious "essentialism", there is a technical "essentialism" through technical fundamentalism, just as frightening as religious fundamentalism*".[5]

3 Oliveira 2018, 12–13.
4 Virilio 2006, 8.
5 Portillo / Costa 2010, 3.

Just like there is a Jewish fundamentalism, or an Islamic or Christian one, you have also now got a technological fundamentalism. It is the religion of those who believe in the absolute power of technology, a ubiquitous, instantaneous and immediate technology. I think a balance is needed to remain free vis-a-vis technology, a balance which consists of a knowledge of religion, even if this entails the risks of fundamentalism and intolerance. Without this knowledge one is without balance, and one cannot face the threats of *technological fundamentalism*, of cyberspace and of the extreme lunacy of social cybernetics.[6]

Technological fundamentalism amplifies the sense of uncertainty inherent in urban life. This uncertainty, as indicated by Virilio, is what Ulrich Beck in contemporary social philosophy highlighted as the centrality of risk *as a defining characteristic of modern society*. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in urban environments, which are increasingly shaped by complex and interconnected challenges within the context of a dynamic and globalised world. *Urban risks* arise from a range of structural and socioeconomic tensions, including the widening disparity between wealth and poverty, demographic shifts marked by aging populations or youth-dominated societies, increased human mobility, the rapid diffusion of technological innovations, and varied occupational and environmental conditions within a technopolis—a term denoting a highly industrialised and rapidly evolving urban landscape. Against the backdrop of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Beck explored these issues in his seminal work *Risikogesellschaft* (Risk Society), published in Germany in 1986. Its English translation, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, was released in 1992. According to Beck's argument, in western cultures, the latter half of the twentieth century has been described as an epoch of flux, uncertainty and rapid social change. We inhabit a "runaway world" characterised by pervasive dangers, including military conflicts and environmental crises. Consequently, a growing portion of daily life is devoted to navigating change, managing uncertainty, and evaluating the personal implications of situations that often seem beyond individual control. In many respects, the defining features of modern society

6 Armitage 2000, 44.

are inextricably linked to the phenomenon of risk. Within contemporary culture, risk has emerged as an omnipresent concern, casting its shadow across a wide spectrum of practices and experiences.[7]

A *risk society* necessitates a greater emphasis on interculturality, which prioritises dialogue over mere multicultural coexistence. Genuine dialogue can, however, only occur when individuals actively engage with and consider the perspectives of others. Simply presenting concurrent monologues aimed at persuading others does not constitute meaningful dialogue. Monologues are limited to the articulation of a single perspective, whereas dialogue involves the exchange of insights and mutual learning. This process fosters the development of positions that integrate and reflect multiple viewpoints, encouraging a more comprehensive understanding. The urban landscape of diversity demands a more strategically developed approach to education, one that prioritises intercultural *dialogue* centred on a well-cultivated sense of conscience and civility.

To engage in *meaningful dialogue*, it is essential to acknowledge the possibility that our perspectives may not represent the sole, the best or even the correct viewpoints. Such openness, however, is often challenging, as one's perspective is deeply intertwined with one's world view—a foundational framework that shapes one's understanding of reality. Questioning this world view can feel profoundly unsettling, as it calls into question not only individual beliefs but also the very structures through which reality is interpreted. World views are informed by ideologies—complex systems of beliefs designed to explain and justify social and political arrangements. These deeply ingrained ideologies and world views often impede our ability to recognise the provisional and contingent nature of our perspectives. Instead, we tend to operate from *positions of certainty*, which can stifle *civility* and hinder constructive engagement between individuals with differing viewpoints.[8]

*Dialogue* is an effective form of pedagogy for *critical teacher education*. In contemporary teacher education, particularly within the context of religious studies and religious education, the intersection of *conscience* with critical attitude takes on a pivotal role. Religion is

7 Mythen 2004, 1–10.

8 Nave 2018, 11.

increasingly seen as a field for public discourse and public learning. This is due to the fact that religion actually provides society with a vision of *civility* based on moral structures and values. This is not a new discovery, as the moral contribution of religions to social life is inherent in the very fabric of religion itself. The need for morality as *civility* is fundamental to human nature.

In hypermodernity, religious individuals not only preserve traditional practices and characteristics associated with encountering and experiencing what is sacred but also embrace innovative forms of expression of faith enabled by digital media and cyberspace. These include virtual, imaginative and symbolic modes of religious engagement. Such individuals are profoundly shaped by their encounter with what is sacred, which fundamentally transforms their being and existence. This transformative process allows them to participate in acts of prayer, sacrifice and faith-driven practices, thus positioning them as interlocutors who actively respond to the manifestation of sacredness. The role of civility is central to this experience, which emerges as a crucial element in navigating and articulating these sacred encounters. What is sacred thus becomes both the focal point of personal experience and the enduring "object" of divine action,[9] situated within the broader conceptual framework of a Sacred Canopy.

In that sense, Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* continues to underscore the enduring relevance of religion, particularly in its role as a provider of moral frameworks that shape and guide private life.[10] Although Peter L. Berger was a leading proponent of the "secularisation thesis" early in his career, in *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), he famously retracted his earlier conclusions, declaring them untenable in light of global empirical evidence—except in two specific cases. The first, referred to as "Euro-secularity", pertains to Western Europe, where the secularisation thesis was initially developed, and where a connection between modernisation and secularisation remains plausible. The second case involves the global intelligentsia, who, having adopted the epistemological frameworks of Western education, function as secular elites, even in

9 Oliveira 2018, 17.

10 Berger 1969, 147.

regions where religious movements are experiencing a resurgence.[11] Although the dominance of the secularisation thesis has been challenged in sociological theory for some time, it was not until 2014 that Berger presented his first systematic effort to develop an alternative theoretical framework. In this work, he argued that modernity does not lead to secularisation, but rather to *pluralism*, which he defined as the coexistence of multiple religions alongside a pervasive secular discourse.[12]

In the context of *intercultural* and *interreligious coexistence* within a secular yet *hypermodern* society, this chapter explores the concepts of *conscience* and *civility*, highlighting their importance in equipping educators with the intercultural competence necessary for teaching in increasingly diverse classrooms. It purposefully distinguishes between interreligious learning, an academic pursuit, and interreligious dialogue, which is more sociological, psychological or political in nature. Rather than conflating these approaches, this chapter adopts an analytical framework to examine *the foundational concepts of conscience and civility, which should guide teacher education*, with *a particular focus on Islamic contributions to intercultural forms of pedagogy* in a society that, nonetheless, operates etsi Deus non daretur ("as if God did not exist", a dictum by Hugo Grotius).

## 1. The Difference between Conscience and Consciousness

Before examining the role of conscience and civility in Islamic epistemology, it is essential to first *distinguish* between the terms conscience and consciousness, as they are often used interchangeably. *Consciousness* has been a subject of classical discourse among academics, philosophers and theologians throughout history and across cultures. It is often regarded as a complex and multifaceted issue, raising questions such as: What is consciousness? How should it be approached? In what ways is it discussed? What objectives guide its study? The broad scope and interdisciplinary nature of

11 Berger 1999, 1–18.

12 Timol 2020 / Also see: Berger 2014.

the topic make consciousness a compelling area of inquiry across diverse fields of study.

*Consciousness* has long been a subject of *intense debate within academic circles*. Perspectives on how it is conceptualised and addressed vary significantly based on expertise, cultural context and belief systems. Within the Western intellectual tradition of the 20th century, consciousness was often regarded as a matter of common sense or even as a taboo topic, rather than as a legitimate object of study. However, *in the 21st century*, with growing existential inquiries and a renewed emphasis on spirituality, consciousness has emerged as a central topic in both academic and popular discourse. Scholars, scientists and proponents of New Age philosophies have engaged enthusiastically in these discussions. Furthermore, non-Western intellectual traditions—often described as philosophical or as encompassing *the esoteric dimensions of religion*—such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism have been increasingly explored to enrich and challenge the value-neutral standards of Western academic frameworks. On the one hand, consciousness is closely tied to the mind–body debate, often framed within the *Cartesian dichotomy*, and on the other, it intersects with discussions on spirituality, such as those explored in Maslow's *humanistic psychology*. *Inquiries into consciousness* can be classified into *definitional*, *phenomenological*, *epistemological*, *ontological* and *axiological* dimensions. However, a detailed exploration of these aspects falls outside the scope of this chapter.

In the Western Muslim academic community, efforts to integrate science, philosophy and spirituality into Islamic tradition were notably advanced by scholars such as Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas and Malik Badri in the late 1970s. Their work is inspired by the scientific achievements of the Islamic Golden Age. Prominent scholars from this era, including Al-Kindi, Al-Balkhi, Al-Razi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali, continue to influence contemporary Muslim psychologists who seek to revive the Islamic tradition of studying the soul, known as *'ilm al-nafs* (now referred to as Islamic psychology). This discipline aims to address the spiritual dimension of an individual—the heart—by cultivating virtues and purifying the soul through *tazkiya al-nafs* ("purifying the self"). Islamic psychology reintroduces moral sensibility into mental health practices for Muslim communities, offering an al-

ternative to contemporary Freudian psychoanalysis, which is often viewed as incompatible with Islamic principles.[13] While it has faced academic criticism, including from some Muslim psychologists, it has gained practical appreciation among Muslim communities, particularly those residing in the West, where there is a growing demand for mental health approaches that align with Islamic values.[14] Although significant, this noteworthy development in Islamic psychology is not the focus of this chapter.

In terms of the definitional dimension, Vithoulkas G. Muresanu defines "consciousness" as the cognitive function of the human mind that encompasses receiving, processing and evaluating information before either storing or discarding it. This process relies on the interplay of the five senses, reasoning, imagination, emotion and memory. The five senses gather information, imagination and emotion assist in processing it, reason evaluates its validity, and memory determines whether it is retained or dismissed.[15]

An individual's conscience reflects their character, guiding them to do what is right in accordance with their moral awareness, particularly when there is no external oversight of their behaviour. It functions as an internal authority, rooted in an individual's mental grasp of moral standards. Whether one defines conscience as a faculty of the soul or something else, it pertains to the workings of subjectivity, being internal to the individual, yet it is also linked to societal notions of law and the collective understanding of moral good. Conscience is not an independent principle or authority, but operates dynamically in relation to the moral standards of society, even when an individual, in good conscience, chooses to dissent from them.[16] The concept of "conscience", particularly in its moral sense, refers to the innate capacity of a healthy human being to discern between right and wrong and, based on this discernment, to regulate, evaluate and guide their actions. Ethical values such as right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice, and fairness and unfairness have been integral to human history, though they are

13 Rassool 2021, 3–53.

14 Naufanita/Nurwahidin/Ghozali 2023, 66.

15 For a detailed analysis of the concept, see Muresanu 2013.

16 Heck 2014, 292.

also influenced by an individual's cultural, political and economic context. The extent to which one's internal state of conscience aligns with a higher perception of these moral ideals—such as goodness, justice and fairness—determines the strength of one's conscience. Acting in accordance with these principles tends to reduce physical stress and fosters a sense of inner harmony. Conscience can be viewed as a measure of an individual's integrity and honesty, as it governs and evaluates the quality of one's actions. Acting with a "clear conscience" provides the psychological advantage of inner peace, which helps mitigate the physiological effects of stress. Furthermore, conscience serves as the "highest authority" in moral evaluation, assessing the ethical quality of actions, whether they are good or evil, fair or unfair, and so on. Consequently, conscience surpasses consciousness in rank and significance, as it not only evaluates information but also determines its application, whether for good or for harm. The formation of "conscience" through the ages is the highest spiritual characteristic of human beings. In the field of moral conduct, there are various self-evident truths which an average, normal person usually accepts, e.g., "do not to others what you would not wish to be done to yourself", "parents should be honoured", etc.[17]

## 2. Conscience (*damïr / wijdān*) in Islamic Epistemology

Most Western conceptions of conscience have no direct counterparts in Islam. It would be challenging to reconcile many modern and postmodern views of conscience, such as those proposed by Nietzsche or Freud, with Islamic thought. Indeed, aligning these views with Judaism or Christianity would also be difficult. However, it is still possible to engage in cross-cultural and cross-religious reflection on a moral life and civility through a discussion of the "importance of conscience" in teacher education. Arabic, the language of Islam, holds a special significance as the language of the Qur'an, even though non-Muslim Arabs, particularly Christians, also use it for liturgical and religious purposes. The term commonly used in

17 Muresanu 2013, 105.

contemporary Arabic for conscience, *damïr*, does not appear in the Qur'an or in the Hadith, the collection of prophetic sayings. Though *damïr* has a long history in Islam, it acquired its moral and judicial connotations only during the colonial and postcolonial periods, coming to represent the concept of conscience as understood in the Christian West.[18]

However, there is another term in Islamic literature that is as prevalent as *damïr*: *wijdān*. If teacher education, particularly in the context of religious studies and theology, aims to cultivate a deeper understanding of the human condition in its diversity, then this condition is intricately linked to our capacity for, and potential to develop, a "good conscience" and "civility".

Etymologically, the word *wijdān* is linked to the concept of a hidden quality. In modern Arabic, *wijdān* has come to signify conscience or moral consciousness, and its etymology suggests a strong inward orientation, referring to an internal moral voice. What is particularly notable about this term is its derivation from the root word *wujūd*, which means "being" or "existence". This connection indicates that moral consciousness and existential awareness are intertwined in the concept's meaning. The root *wujūd* itself comes from the Arabic verb meaning "to find", suggesting that existence is fundamentally about discovery. Something that is "found" is, in some sense, present, which implies that it exists. Thus, *wujūd* can be understood as both "being" and "finding". This root also gives rise to the term *wijdān* (consciousness) as well as *wajd*, which refers to "spiritual joy" or "bliss". There is, therefore, a profound connection between being/finding, moral consciousness and bliss. The act of "finding" oneself, and through this self-awareness, experiencing bliss, represents the highest level of conscience.

> Conscience is not simply about you and God or you and yourself even when it depends on internal consultation, nor is it a tool to get you to conform to the status quo in society. Rather, it involves recognition of a moral good beyond oneself against which one evaluates one's own choices and actions—and potentially those of others as well! (The ego is never wholly alone.) In Islam, some things are not to be transgressed by the state: the inviolability of innocent life (*hurmat al-nafs*), religion

18 Heck 2014, 296.

(*hurmat al-dīn*), property (*hurmat al-māl*), and even personal honor (*hurmat al-ʿird*).[19]

The recognition of a moral good beyond oneself is closely tied to the purification of both the heart and the mind. The texts of Islam use various terms to describe the inner life upon which "conscience is built": *fitra* (innate nature), *qalb* (heart), *aql* (mind), *nafs* (self), *sirr* (secret) and others.

In the Islamic tradition, there is a saying attributed to the Prophet concerning ethical or moral *fiṭra*. As reported by al-Nawwās ibn Sam'ān, the Prophet once said, "Goodness (*al-birr*) is good manners, and evil (*al-ithm*) is that which causes discomfort in your inner self (*al-ithmu mā ḥāka fī nafsika*) and you do not want people to know it (*wa-karihta an yaṭṭaliʾa ʾalayhi al-nās*)" (Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim, 32: 6195 and 32: 6196). In another *ḥadīth*, Wābiṣah ibn Maʾbad reported that during his visit he was asked by the Prophet, "Have you come to inquire about 'goodness'?", to which he replied in the affirmative. Then the Prophet said, "*Ask your heart regarding it. Goodness is that which contents the soul and comforts the heart* (*al-birr mā iṭmaʾannat ilayhi al-nafs wa-iṭmaʾanna ilayhi al-qalb*), and *Evil is that which raises doubts and disturbs the heart* (*taraddada fī al-ṣadr*), even if people pronounce it lawful and give you verdicts on such matters again and again". From these Prophetic traditions we can infer that apart from being a breach of the laws and norms laid down by religion, there is a psychological aspect of sin as wrongdoing.[20] The heart serves as the ultimate arbiter, and one is advised to trust and follow it, even in the face of opposing counsel.

Within the framework of this Prophetic vision, the concept of "conscience" (*wijdān*) occupies a pivotal role in Islamic public theology. Classical Islamic scholars have devoted significant attention to the study of *wijdān*. The Hanafi scholar and theologian from Bukhara, Sadr al-Shariʿa (d. 747/1346) discusses the relationship between *wijdān* and the science of *kalām* in his seminal work *al-Tawḍīḥ*. After defining *kalām* as the discipline concerned with discerning what is in favour of or against (*mā lahā wa mā ʿalayhā*) an individual in terms of belief, Sadr al-Shariʿa extends this

19 Heck 2014, 302.

20 Arif 2023, 90–91.

definition to encompass *wijḍāniyyāt/the principles of conscience*. He describes *wijḍāniyyāt* as "inner morals/conscience" (*akhlāq al-bāṭina*) and "spiritual capacities" (*malakāt al-nafsāniyya*). In this context, he highlights qualities integral to *wijḍāniyyāt*, including asceticism (*zuhd*), patience (*ṣabr*), contentment (*riḍā*) and cultivating divine consciousness (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*) during prayer. A conscience enriched with these virtues is equipped to navigate complex situations with wisdom and integrity, underscoring its significance in ethical and spiritual decision-making.[21]

Similarly, Taftazani (born 1322 in Taftazan, Iran–died 1390 in Samarkand), who is described as following the Shafi'i school in jurisprudence but Hanafi in creed lists the types of necessary knowledge (*al-ulûm az-dharûriyya*) in his works *Sharh al-Maqasid* and *al-Mutawwal*, mentioning that experiential knowledge (*mushahadât*) is divided into two types: sensory knowledge (*hissiyyât*) and *wijdâniyyât*. He notes that judgements made by the intellect through external senses are called *hissiyyât*, while those made through internal senses (the five internal senses recognised in classical philosophy) are termed *wijdāniyyat*. Phrases like *hâlât-ı wijdāniyyah* (states of conscience) and *kayfiyyât-ı wijdāniyyah* (qualities of conscience) have been used in this context.[22]

The explanation of the term "*wijdān*" conscience in an extensive Sufi lexicon written in the first half of the 19th century aligns with the information conveyed above. In his work *Istılâhât-ı Insân-ı Kâmil* (*Terminology on the Perfect Human*) completed in 1824, Seyyid Mustafa Rasim Efendi defines *wijdān/vicdan* as follows: "*It is known that to find a state within oneself is called vicdan/wijdān… Similarly, to find the Divine (Hakk) through a vicdânî/wijdān perception is the same.*"[23]

Another example is İzmirli İsmail Hakkı of Istanbul at the turn of the 20th century. In his brief treatise *Tasnîf al-Ulûm* (The Classification of Sciences), İzmirli İsmail Hakkı categorises the sciences into three main sections: theoretical (*nazari*), practical (*amali*) and conscientious (*wijdāni*). Under the section titled "*Fiqh al-Wijdânî*"

21 See Türker 2023, 19–54.

22 ibid., 26–27.

23 Köksal 2024. Transl.

(Conscientious Jurisprudence), he addresses topics related to ethics and moral conscience.[24]

This nuanced approach by Muslim scholars effectively connects the human condition to conscience (*wijdān*), and, by extension, to civility. The pedagogical study of religion, both in relation to and within religious traditions, has historically been integral to the educational systems of civilised societies. As Mircea Eliade noted, "To live as human nature" is itself a religious act, with the awareness of a real and meaningful world being profoundly linked to the discovery of what is sacred.[25]

## 3. Civility (*Tamaddon*) as "Being-in-the-World" with Care

Conscience and consciousness are contextually and critically linked to the concept of civility. In the study and teaching of religion, we often encounter the tension and interplay between the eschaton (apocalyptic or end times) and civility (worldly or urbanised times).

> Civility is not only about politeness: its scope is greater in that it relates to adherence to social norms and its opposite, i.e. the breaking of social norms. It cannot be denied that religion, as one of the prime sources for moral conscience, order and social norms, is closely linked to civility, i.e. good manners and correct behaviour.[26]

Civility pertains to how we navigate our *being-in-the-world* with care. Understanding Islam through Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" (In-der-Welt-sein) would provide valuable insight into Islam's nature by examining how it manifests itself in the world as a theologically and politically distinct religious phenomenon.[27]

Our *being-in-the-world* with care ultimately revolves around the principle of civility. Most religious traditions emphasise civility, embedding it within their core teachings. However, the principle of civility is often not realised in practice. According to the Pew Re-

24 Şener 1996, 320.
25 Ene/Barna 2015, 35.
26 Frydenlund 2013, 112.
27 Milani 2024, 12.

search Center, approximately 80 % of the global population adheres to one of the five major world religions, indicating that a significant portion of humanity has, at times, engaged in uncivil behaviour despite following scriptures that explicitly oppose such actions. Religious faith does not endorse cruelty, mass violence, radicalisation or incivility; rather, it advocates equitable and respectful treatment of others. Ultimately, civility transcends religious, political and racial boundaries, emerging as a fundamental human and social issue.[28]

What is the ultimate purpose of any teacher in any subject, especially in the field of humanities? I think we can safely say that it is to contribute to the development of students' identities through establishing an understanding and awareness of how to navigate through life without much conflict. This is where the very fine art of speaking about moral conscience (*wijdān*) and civility (*tamaddon-madaniyyah*) comes in.

If civility is understood as "being-in-the-world" with care, then the purpose of education, particularly in the field of religious pedagogy, is to help students develop the ability to balance the eschaton with the present world. Civility entails tolerance for others, enabling individuals and groups with divergent views to coexist peacefully and work within a representative and participatory system to achieve their personal goals.[29] In Islamic tradition, civility is regarded as the highest social virtue, cultivated by Muslims through adherence to Islam's earthly ethical teachings, rather than solely to its legal or eschatological aspects. In other words, the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Islam take precedence over its legal and ritual practices. The full realisation of Islam's essential principles, therefore, can be meaningfully applied in the modern context, as values commonly considered "modern" (such as social and gender equality, democracy and individual freedom) have long been inherent in Islamic teachings.[30] Morality, where conscience operates, is the discretion exercised in the pursuit of absolute individual freedom.[31]

Morality and freedom converge in the concept of civility. This idea of civility (*at-tamaddon* / *al-madaniyah*) is deeply rooted in

28 Newell 2019, 2–3.

29 An-Na'im 2005, 39.

30 Milad / Vassilios 2020, 4.

31 Taha 1987, 51.

Islamic jurisprudence and theology, particularly through the principles of Maroof (the public or common good) and Taarof (living together in peace), which emphasise mutual respect and harmonious coexistence. Drawing on John Rawls' concept of a "reasonable overlapping consensus", these principles promote peaceful coexistence without undermining religious integrity. Rawls describes overlapping consensus as the agreement among diverse groups on justice/fairness principles that underpin societal institutions, despite differing foundational doctrines. This is the way we can create "reasonable pluralism".[32] This resonates with Islamic teachings on mutual cooperation/helping each other (*ta'awun: al-Maidah, 5: 2*)[33], shared goodness (*birr: al-Baqara 2:177*) and patience (*sabr*, *al-Asr, 103:3*), "controlling hate and anger" ("*kazemeeyn al-ghayz", Ali Imran 3:134*)[34] and forgiveness towards everyone (*'âfeena 'ani-n'nâs, Ali Imran 3:134*), which provide a common form of ethical civility for public life. All these principles underline that the "difference" is the norm and that "civility" is the core of diversity in the Divine plan for human beings. In a society of diversity, "*a civilized person does not confuse ends with means, and he does not sacrifice ends for the sake of means. He is a man of principles and of moral values, one who has achieved a complete intellectual and emotional life*".[35]

The Qur'anic injunctions to refrain from being judgemental ("*alaina al-Hesab*," al-Rad 13:40) and to "collaborate in goodness and righteousness" ("*taawunoo alal-birr wa't-taqwa*," al-Maidah 5:2) further emphasise the compatibility of moral conscience with intercultural civility. These values, highlighted in the Qur'an, transcend religious and ethnic affiliations and are deeply embedded within the Islamic epistemological framework. They offer a model of civility that aligns with the demands of pluralistic societies. Notably, Peter Berger's concept of "civil Islam" suggests that Islamic values have the potential to shape global civil society, underlining their relevance to contemporary challenges related to diversity and coexistence. In Islamic epistemology and ontology, the very definition of *iman* (faith) refers to a reasoned and heartfelt awareness of

32 Rawls 2001, 32–37.

33 Mazlan/Khairuldin 2018.

34 Gördük 2024.

35 Taha 1987, 51.

the distinction between good and bad. This is exemplified in the definition of *iman* by Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Ahl-e Sunnah (Orthodox) jurisprudential school, which emphasises the necessity of understanding what is good and bad for oneself (*marifat an-nafs ma laha wa maa alayha*). In Islam, faith (*iman*) is understood as a "Credo ut intelligam" ("I believe so that I can understand"), rather than a "Credo quia absurdum" ("I believe because it is absurd"), which highlights the rational and introspective nature of belief.

Moral conscience forms the foundation for critically engaging with interculturality. Educators who are grounded in moral conscience are better equipped to navigate the complexities of global citizenship, which necessitates an ethical commitment to diversity, tolerance and social justice. This ethical framework promotes a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of local and global challenges, such as climate change, which require collaborative and inclusive solutions. Additionally, it is rooted in an understanding of interreligious dialogue, which aligns with the concept of critical civility. Civility, in this context, prepares citizens for life in an interconnected, pluralistic society and is intrinsically linked to peace and tolerance.[36] According to the ideal, the civil citizen exercises tolerance in the face of deep disagreement about the good, respecting the rights of others and refraining from violence, harassment and coercion. Consequently, absolutist ideologies and world views, religious or secular, may collide with such an accommodation of positions in a plural setting.[37] It provides a strong "sense of a unity in diversity among progressive forces".[38]

A multiculturality ("interculturality" B.S.) must be created, politically produced, worked on, in the sweat of one's brow, in concrete history. The very quest for this oneness in difference, the struggle for it as a process, in and of itself is the beginning of a creation of multiculturality. Let us emphasize once more: multiculturality as a phenomenon involving the coexistence of different cultures in one and the same space is not something natural and spontaneous. It is a historical creation, involving decision, political determination, mobilization, and organization, on the part of each cultural group,

36 Frydenlund 2013, 112.

37 ibid., 113.

38 Freire 1994, 30.

in view of common purposes. Thus, it calls for a certain educational practice, one that will be consistent with these objectives. It calls for a new ethics, founded on respect for differences.[39]

What Paulo Freire refers to as multiculturality in the 1990s can now be understood as the concept of interculturality that we strive for today. It is this interculturality that should be placed at the core of education, with civility and critical conscience at its heart. This approach is essential for reconciling it with the "civilizing power of religions" through an overlapping consensus. Ultimately, civility encompasses a set of "civic values", such as respect, compassion, tolerance, non-violence and a focus on public welfare and the common good. In traditional Islamic jurisprudence and theology, the concept of civility (*tamaddon*) is closely linked to the ideas of *marūf* and *ta'āruf*, which can be translated as "living together" in harmony. This concept aligns with John Rawls' notion of an overlapping consensus in his *Theory of Justice*, where diverse groups agree on shared principles of justice and fairness.

In his contribution to *Religion in Global Civil Society*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer (2005), the late sociologist Peter Berger contrasts Protestantism with Islam within the context of civil society. Berger posits that the emergence of what he terms "civil Islam" represents a potential future development. While his use of the phrase "in the future" may carry implicit connotations of orientalism and condescension, his argument remains a thoughtful and substantive one.[40] Civil Islam is also about civility in the intercultural social space.

Civility, as Edward Shils defines it, involves restraints on "particularistic ends".

> Civility is a belief which affirms the possibility of the common good; it is a belief in the community of contending parties within a morally valid unity of society. It is a belief in the validity or legitimacy of the governmental institutions which lay down rules and resolve conflicts. Civility is a virtue expressed in action on behalf of the whole society, on behalf of the good of all members of the society to which public liberties and representative institutions are integral. Civility is an attitude in

39 Freire 1994, 147.

40 Berger 2005, 18–19.

> individuals which recommends that consensus about the maintenance of the order of society should exist alongside the conflict of interests and ideals.[41]

Civility, as Shils emphasises, encompasses much more than merely "good manners in face-to-face interactions".[42] It would thus seem to be the virtue of knowing how to compromise between various competing virtues. It is the virtue of knowing when not to be too obsessed with virtue. According to Eiko Ikegami, sociologically, civility might be thought as a ritual technology of interpersonal exchanges or the cultural grammar of sociability that shapes a kind of intermediate zone of social relationships between the intimate and the hostile. Civility provides a basis for communication between people who may otherwise be very different, its codes also help to establish a quasi-trust in the routine actions of impersonal social relations.[43]

The concept of civility, which is often associated with confrontation and intolerance, is crucial for understanding how religious actors contribute to community reconstruction in both violent and non-violent conflicts at local, regional and global levels. Civility is particularly valuable in intercultural and interreligious contexts as it is closely linked to the principle of holism. Religion plays a central role in promoting holistic values, thus offering a framework for unity amid political and economic fragmentation. Holism emphasises the integrity of a whole—spanning from the cosmic to the individual—through synergistic relationships rather than mere additive connections. This dynamic notion of integrity highlights the relational nature of cultural and social coherence, underscoring the importance of integration through cooperation rather than isolation.[44]

Religions carry distinct perspectives on the ultimate order of the world and its impact on social structures. This underscores the crucial role of education in developing teachers' ability to engage in intercultural interactions, a skill now essential in our interconnected world. Challenges once seen as local or national, such as climate

41 Shils 1997, 4.

42 ibid., 49.

43 Ikegami 2005, 28–29.

44 Herrington/Mckay/Haynes 2015, 96–101.

change, now have global implications, which highlights the need for human cooperation and intercultural dialogue that transcends borders.

In this context, cultivating both a moral and a critical conscience is essential for developing well-rounded educators and global citizens capable of navigating today's interconnected world. Civil society comprises diverse voluntary associations, with religion serving as an autonomous intermediary between societal associations and the state. Civility, in this framework, refers to the civilised resolution of differences, not their absence. These differences arise from distinct world views that shape interpretations of reality, leading to potential conflicts. Religion plays a crucial role in this respect by providing the moral foundations for resolving these differences through respect, responsibility and accountability. In a pluralistic community, religions engage with one another by presenting their world views with respect and tolerance, fostering a collective responsibility for maintaining an orderly, harmonious society. Respect entails recognising and affirming differences, while responsibility focuses on promoting the common good. Accountability ensures that all members of the community are answerable for their actions and the well-being of society.[45]

Religion calls on society to embrace *civility*, emphasising respect, responsibility and accountability—core moral principles rooted in religious teachings. In today's dynamic world, educators must adapt to the growing diversity of cultural, linguistic and social identities shaping students' experiences. To navigate this complexity, educators should cultivate a moral conscience (*wijdān*) as the foundation for intercultural coexistence. This conscience serves as the basis for students engaging with interculturality, prompting educators to prioritise critical interculturality, which goes beyond surface-level cultural differences to foster transformative cross-cultural experiences. Such approaches can be integrated into teacher education programmes, thus emphasising immersive engagement in diverse communities, both locally and globally.

These programmes, which go beyond mere proximity to host communities and their customs, play a crucial role in reshaping ed-

45 Beyers 2011, 250.

ucators' personal and professional identities. Such experiences inform and transform their teaching approaches, fostering the development of a critical conscience, an inclusive sense of identity and enhanced communicative competence. This empowers educators to navigate and enrich their work in diverse, interconnected educational environments. Teaching about religion, which is distinct from the teaching of religion, requires nuanced understanding of the moral conscience and civility. A comprehensive education includes the study of comparative religion and its historical role in shaping civilisation. Effective teaching demands skills in facilitating open, non-judgemental discussions, while supporting students' reflective processes. Educators must engage with students' lived experiences, transforming the classroom into a space for critical exploration of personal and collective issues. This approach requires a deep commitment to both education and the personal growth of students, appreciating religions as frameworks for understanding human nature and transcendence across traditions. [46]

Civility is essential for community building and ethical deliberation. In *Civility* (1998), Stephen Carter identifies a tension between two impulses: a "cynical" drive to dominate others and a "generous" impulse to engage hospitably and deliberatively. This tension highlights the need for tolerance and pluralism in fostering coexistence. Tolerance involves maintaining civility despite disagreement, while pluralism goes further by not only upholding civility but also seeking a deeper understanding of others' perspectives and identifying shared values or common ground. [47]

The role of religion in global civil society remains a topic of scholarly debate, with recent studies highlighting its growing influence on political behaviour, thus challenging secularisation theories. Religions manifest themselves through various self-constituted groups and organisations that facilitate communal participation and the dissemination of beliefs. For example, Buddhism expands through the sangha, Christianity through churches, parishes and missionary movements, and Islam through mosques, da'wa organisations and Sufi orders. Jewish communities gather in synagogues and centres,

46 Hannam 2024, 253.

47 Biondo/Fiala 2014, 37–77.

focusing on social networking and charitable work aligned with *tikkun olam* (healing the world). These diverse religious organisations continually adapt their structures and activities to meet the evolving needs of their members, ensuring their relevance in contemporary civil society.[48]

Educators must understand the framework of a pluralistic moral conscience and civility to navigate the complexities of teaching in a diverse, interconnected world. This framework is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment that engages with cultural and moral diversity. Addressing the challenges of twenty-first century education is not only the responsibility of students but also of educators. It requires reshaping institutional norms and practices while recognising when power imbalances conflict with the goals of interdisciplinary, collaborative problem-solving.[49]

Teacher education is fundamentally rooted in "conscience-raising", where educators are encouraged to critically examine their own biases and blind spots, understanding how they may influence their teaching practices. An individual's religious background and identity can significantly shape their approach to education, particularly in influencing the implicit and null curriculum within the classroom. Pre-service teachers are consistently prompted to reflect on various aspects of their identities, including race, gender and socioeconomic status, and to consider how these intersecting identities inform their perspectives on their roles as educators, their relationships with students and colleagues, and their engagement with the subject matter. This framework underscores the transformative potential of teacher education in fostering critical and ethical engagement within diverse sociocultural contexts. Teachers are transmitters of knowledge, and therefore, when teachers are misinformed about religion, we risk creating misinformed students. The majority of teachers who explicitly teach about religion do so in the context of the humanities and social sciences—history, world cultures or geography classes.[50]

Philosophically, debates concerning teachers' religious beliefs in education have focused upon issues of indoctrination, confession-

48 Rowe 2016, 2–4.

49 Imbruce et al. 2024, 2.

50 Soules/Jafralie 2021, 46–48.

alism, neutrality and impartiality. What is needed is a non-confessional, impartial approach which is secular, though not "secularist" or relativist, and makes space for teachers' beliefs. Teaching impartially means that teachers may draw upon their personal views, provided they do this with academic integrity and without the aim of persuading students to adopt their views. How do teachers understand the purpose of teaching about world religions? In what way do the teachers' personal beliefs influence how they represent world religions?[51]

A critical conscience requires a relational orientation—learning with, from and about others. This understanding is realised through the intentional cultivation of a moral conscience (*wijdān*). Educators are called upon to pursue what John Rawls terms "reflexive equilibrium", which aligns with the Qur'anic principle of *al-Qıst* —"justice as fairness". This principle fosters an "overlapping consensus", where individuals from diverse backgrounds find common ground.

Teacher education programmes must guide educators in developing both intercultural competence and moral growth. These programmes should also cultivate a cultural conscience, enabling educators to engage with diverse communities. By focusing on both individual development and collective understanding, teacher education can prepare educators to navigate global complexities and contribute to a more just and equitable world.

## Conclusion

In today's diverse educational landscape, intercultural teacher education programmes are essential for preparing educators to engage effectively with students from various cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The purpose of education has long been debated, with competing answers. A key goal of teacher education should be to cultivate the skills and virtues of deliberation, enabling citizens in a pluralistic society to engage in "*conscious social reproduction in its most inclusive form*".[52] Critical thinking is

51 Nelson/Yang 2023, 320–323.

52 Moore 2007, 10–11.

the type of thinking used in problem-solving, determining probable outcomes, formulating inferences, and making decisions. Critical thinking involves asking questions, defining a problem, examining evidence, analysing assumptions and biases, avoiding emotional reasoning, avoiding oversimplification, considering other interpretations and tolerating ambiguity.[53] Critical thinking generally involves descriptive facticity, scientific accuracy and correlative and normative judgement.[54]

Equally important is the development of student teachers' identities. As they cultivate cultural sensitivity, employ responsive teaching strategies and engage in reflective practice, they refine their pedagogical skills and undergo a transformation in their professional identities. This transformation is essential for educators to be effective in diverse classrooms and committed to fostering inclusivity, equity and intercultural understanding. The development of a teacher's identity is influenced by their personality, which shapes how they approach religious content. As the adage suggests, "*Show me a teacher with a strong, dynamic, and exciting personality, and they will show you a religion lesson effectively taught*".[55]

Intercultural teacher education is not just about acquiring techniques; it is a process of personal and professional development. It involves becoming an educator capable of navigating the complexities of today's diverse world and inspiring students from all backgrounds. In this context, it is essential to explore how faith traditions offer public theologies that reflect their broader social ethics, particularly in ways that acknowledge and engage with cultural and religious diversity in the modern world. However, teachers must also deeply understand their students' contexts to know when, where and how to effectively engage with diversity and global learning. This approach should begin with meeting students where they are to ensure that diversity is integrated meaningfully and memorably into their learning experience.[56]

In educating student teachers in religious studies, we encourage undergraduate students—most of whom are not specialising in the

53 Saidahmadovna 2024, 102.
54 Jarmer 2024, 11.
55 Michalski 2020, 182.
56 Lester 2024.

field—to engage critically with "religion". This involves encouraging self-reflection and challenging assumptions to identify and critique sociopolitical power dynamics. Historical evidence shows that faith traditions have often acted as civilising forces when they embraced inclusive attitudes toward the "other". This underscores the importance of fostering inclusivity within teacher education, guided by the ethical teachings of faith traditions, to better prepare educators for the challenges of an interconnected and pluralistic global society.

Any critical self-reflection, to say nothing of critical engagement with the concept of religion itself, requires forging new conceptual synapses through ongoing conversations that actively interrupt the students' preconceived notions about the study of religion and that challenge them to articulate coherent and convincing arguments rooted in scholarly knowledge. Cognizant of the peculiar place the study of religion has in our academy, and attendant to the fact that our students arrive with much baggage, all religion classes (no matter where they go whence forth) must therefore begin with the most basic and also the most difficult questions about "religion" in general: What is religion? What does it mean to say that religion is a social phenomenon? What is the study of religion? What is the relationship between [the] study of religion and religion as an object of scholarly investigation? Does studying religion enhance or illuminate our understanding of the human condition as such? And if so, in what ways? These are the right kind[s] of questions to ask in order to set our students on a path to possible discovery![57]

These questions recall the Global Ethics Project initiated by Hans Küng, centred on the concept of a "Global Ethic" rooted in the Golden Rule: "*What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others*," or positively, "What you wish done to yourself, do to others." This principle aligns with the Prophet Muhammad's message: "*None of you becomes a true believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.*"[58] Such teachings form the foundation of Islamic pedagogy and anthropology, emphasising compassion, justice and the rejection of violence. The ongoing global challenges, such as the plight of Gaza, raise essential questions for educators:

57 Hussain/Khurram 2024.

58 Nawawi/Imam 2014.

Should pedagogical frameworks remain silent in the face of injustice, or should they actively promote justice? Justice is central to Islamic teachings, as reflected in the Qur'anic injunction: "*Do not let the hatred of a people lead you to injustice. Be just! That is closer to righteousness*" Qur'an, 5:8. Teacher education in religious studies should address questions of human existence and presence, viewing religion not just as a set of beliefs but as an integral part of life's complexities. This approach fosters a deeper engagement with religion, connecting it to real human experiences such as justice, hope, love, suffering and transcendence. In this way, *intercultural religious education* becomes essential to understanding and engaging with our shared world."[59]

Achieving this level of engagement, which fosters intercultural competence in young people both domestically and internationally, requires teachers and educators who have cultivated this sensitivity and can proficiently transmit it to others.[60] Intercultural education and training is a delicate and difficult endeavour that must be approached with the greatest of sensitivity.[61]

Intercultural competence cannot be fostered through a fixed formula but emerges at the intersection of civility and conscience. Civility in intercultural contexts thrives on diverse perspectives rather than uniformity, which are essential for a dynamic society. Incivility and polarisation stem not from disagreement but from disrespect, which is often rooted in misunderstanding. Therefore, teacher education in intercultural societies must prioritise civility and conscience.

In scriptural traditions, true belief engages the heart—the seat of *conscience*—in reflective reasoning. When religiosity shifts from thoughtful engagement to rigid legalism, core values erode. Thus, embedding *conscience* and *civility* in teacher education, particularly within intercultural contexts, is crucial. Reforming educational institutions, including schools and teacher training programmes, is imperative. Teachers who embody conscience (*wijdān*) and civility (*tamaddon*) are key agents of change, modelling and convey-

59 Hannam/Patricia 2024, 251.
60 Cushner/Mahon 2009, 304.
61 Cushner/McClelland/Safford 2012, 153.

ing transformative values that ripple outwards, fostering societal renewal.

In the poetry of Maulana Rumi, the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) discerned numerous instances of knowledge derived from *wijdān* (conscience) and *bāṭin* (the inner self), which often transcend the limits of the external senses (*ḥavās*). For Iqbal, the knowledge acquired through *conscience/wijdān* and *bāṭin* and that obtained through sensory perception were not mutually exclusive; rather, they existed within a delicate, interrelated framework of complementarity, mediated by a "critical eye" (*tanqīdī naẓar*) that holistically engaged both forms of knowing.[62]

Finally, broadening teachers' ability to think, communicate and interact across cultures and perspectives, as discussed in this chapter, will be a challenging task, particularly given what we know about cultural learning and resistance to change. However, this is an essential aspect of education that can no longer be overlooked.[63]

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62 Ahmad/Irfan 2017, 26–27.

63 Cushner 2009, 317.

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*Gernot Galib Stanfel*

# One's own personal choice of religion from the perspective of family history— a reflection.

## Abstract

Religion that is reduced to ideological terms has the potential to become the opposite of what it wants to be. Ideological misuse can affect family generations and society and can create transgenerational traumas. This chapter represents a personal reflection from the author's own religious perspective and decisions in the context of his family history and with a focus on teaching.

Keywords: Ideology, ideological religion, history, transgenerational trauma, religious conversion, personal reflection.

## 1. Introduction

The following text reflects the author's personal family history in the context of contemporary history, its influence on his character and his personal decision to convert to Islam. It also explores the idea of transgenerational trauma affecting both the victims and descendants of the perpetrators, and its impact on society and religion. The article is intentionally kept highly personal, aiming to serve as an example for reflecting on family history and identity. The author is aware that identity, from a current perspective, must always be seen as multifaceted. Therefore, it seems crucial to him to heighten awareness of this in educational settings, both among educators and in terms of their perspectives on students, fostering a reflective attitude towards individual influences regarding religion and spirituality. Of course, only a small portion of possible facts can be mentioned in an article like this and for several facts there is no

space here, so it must be a limited version about the main relevant issues. The author also wishes to emphasise that his intention is not to morally judge individuals' actions but to highlight connections that shape personalities and religions beyond theology. Additionally, he expresses gratitude for living under circumstances and conditions that allow him to engage in such reflections. People who are still alive are not mentioned by name.

## 2. The Protestants

My great-grandfather, Robert Stanfel, was born in Klagenfurt in the Austrian province of Carinthia (Kärnten) in 1856 as the only son of Anton Stanfel, the district commissioner of Spittal an der Drau and former deputy mayor of Klagenfurt. This highly esteemed man, one of the highest-ranking officials in the crown land of Carinthia and a successful politician, became acquainted with the gymnastics movement during his studies in Prague[1] and brought it to Carinthia. He was also a pioneer in Carinthian tourism, responsible for cadastral surveying and other initiatives.[2] Alongside his liberal political stance, which at that time was synonymous with German nationalism, his commitment to the gymnastics movement[3] also underscored his political views.[4]

The life of my great-grandfather was subsequently less illustrious and did not follow a clear career path like his father's. He studied agriculture and forestry in Laibach/Ljubljana[5] and, possibly due to not receiving an inheritance, moved to Prussia, where he worked as an estate manager near Stettin. Little is known about his time there; one known fact is that he applied for German citizenship, but his application was denied by a decree in Stettin in 1893. In 1894, he returned to Austria. He then apparently lived alternately

1 At that time, the capital of the crown land of Bohemia in the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy.
2 Freie Stimmen, 7 December 1910, Klagenfurt.
3 Freie Stimmen, 21 April 1912, Klagenfurt.
4 On the Deutsche Turnerwesen, cf. Ueberhorst 1987.
5 At that time, the crown land Krain of the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy, 1918–1992 Yugoslavia, since 1991 the capital of Slovenia.

in Vienna and Langenzersdorf near Vienna. Whether influenced by his father in Carinthia or shaped during his time in Prussia, he now emerged as a fervent German nationalist ideologue.[6] Following the idea of German nationalist thinking, he converted from the Roman Catholic Church to the Protestant Church A.B. in 1901. This religious shift was part of the "Away from Rome Movement" (Los von Rom Bewegung)[7], initiated by Georg von Schönerer, the founder of the German National Party. This party, aside from its idealisation of German culture, was strictly anti-Semitic—two core tenets of its ideology that were inseparably linked. According to this logic, a true German man should belong to the genuine German religion of Martin Luther or possibly to the Old Catholic Church.

The Protestant Church in Austria supported these new converts through the "Evangelical Union" (Evangelischer Bund), with my great-grandfather serving as its secretary from 1906 until this role was dissolved in 1921.[8] But his involvement did not end there. He was a board member in at least two associations of the Schönerer Movement, namely the "Schönerer Union" (Schönerer Bund)[9] and subsequently the "All-German Schönerer Association" (Alldeutscher Verein Schönerer), a merger of two Schönerer associations that defined "the Anschluss (annexation) as their highest goal.[10] Adolf Hitler carried out this "Anschluss" (annexation) of Austria to Germany 13 years later. In his book Mein Kampf, Hitler named Georg von Schönerer and his activities, which he became familiar with during his years in Vienna, as one of the main sources of inspiration for his ideology.[11] In 1938 my great-grand-

6 This ideology referred to the German-speaking population of Austria-Hungary, which, as a result of the "Small German Solution" and the founding of the German Empire in 1871, lived as a minority in their state and therefore wanted to be reunited with their "brother people" in the German Empire, and for this reason also withheld their loyalty from their own state Austria-Hungary. As a result, this idea determined the Republic of Austria founded in 1918, which was actually annexed to Nazi Germany in 1938 through the so-called "Anschluss".

7 Art. Los von Rom Bewegung.

8 Trauner/Zimmermann 2003, 226–227.

9 Deutschösterreichische Tageszeitung, 21 June 1923, Vienna.

10 Deutschösterreichische Tageszeitung, 1 May 1925.

11 On Hitler's years in Vienna and the influence of Schönerer on him, see: Hamann 1998.

father Aryanised the property of his Jewish neighbour[12], Michael Just, the owner of a coffee house, which was also stolen from him.[13] A cupboard from this Aryanised property came to me as a legacy, which made me research and find out about this incident.[14] The wife of Michael Just, Sidonie Just is listed as a victim of the Holocaust[15], while his faith is unknown.

My great-grandfather's son, also his only child and my grandfather, was born in Vienna in 1909. He followed in his father's footsteps in many ways, not only by bearing the same name of Robert Stanfel, but especially ideologically. He, too, was involved in the German nationalist movement, primarily in the "German School Association Southmark" (Deutscher Schulverein Südmark)[16], where he served as an editor and youth leader, among other roles.

The rise of National Socialism overshadowed the old German nationalist ideology, presenting itself as a more modern and revolutionary variant. Consequently, old German nationalists were often viewed with disdain by the Nazis rather than as equal ideological allies. As a result, my grandfather, who had studied law and started a career with the Austrian Railway, was denied the Nazi membership he applied for. Ultimately, however, he was admitted in 1940 and sought recognition as an "illegal" member, claiming he had already been a member during the period from 1934 to 1938, when the National Socialist Party was banned during Austria's Austrofascist dictatorship. After the war, he worked to portray this illegal membership as false, which he succeeded in doing.[17] Subsequently, he pursued a career with the Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB), eventually becoming its financial director. In 1969, he was appointed as head of the Railway and Cableway Section in the Ministry of Transport,

12 Meaning that he bought the things for much too low a price by exploiting the pressure that was on Mr. Just.

13 Verzeichnis über das Vermögen von Juden nach dem Stand vom 27. April 1938, filled in and signed by Michael Just on 14 July 1938, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv.

14 Family Archive Stanfel.

15 Dokumentationssrchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes n.d.

16 Erlaftal-Bote, 15 October 1933, Scheibbs.

17 Family Archive Stanfel.

making him one of the highest-ranking officials in the Republic of Austria. He was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Republic of Italy and the Golden Cross of Merit of the Republic of Austria.[18]

My grandfather was a member of and eventually led a German nationalist-oriented student association, a so-called "Deutsche Gilde" (German Guild), from his university days on. These student associations are relatively small compared to the duelling fraternities or the Christian Cartel Association (Cartell Verband) and focus on the ideological nurturing of German nationalism. Following this example, my father too, chaired such a student association for a period, although he later resigned from it. The future brother-in-law of my father was also a member of the same student association as my grandfather and father. He went on to become one of the founding members of the Unification Church in Austria, which was founded by the Korean Rev. Sun Myung Moon. After the Korean War, the Unification Church actively expanded and proselytised in Europe and the USA. Due to its strict anti-communist stance, a student association like the Gilde was well-suited to recruiting new members for this religious movement, a goal that was successfully achieved.[19] My father's sister, who married the aforementioned member of the Gilde, also converted to the Unification Church. Thus, she became the third generation of women in her family to convert to their husband's religion. Both my great-grandmother Margarete Gattringer and my grandmother Helene Jelinek (her father was son of a German-speaking mother and a Czech-speaking father, who was also a declared German nationalist) were raised as Roman Catholics but switched to their husbands' Protestant faith upon marriage. This Protestant religion had come into the family for ideological and political reasons and had shaped their approach to religion over the generations. The conversions did not end here, however: after becoming a widow, my great-grandmother converted to the church of the Seven Day Adventists. My father's other sister married a Protestant pastor, with whom she went on a mission to Borneo for a few years. Later, they divorced, and my aunt became a disciple of several Hindu teachers. Only my father, in contrast to his sisters, remained

18 Usual awards for highly ranked officials.

19 Pokorny/Steinbeiss 1966–1969, 193.

Protestant and continues to follow it to date (2024), although he has also shown a deep interest in traditional religions and shamanism from South America and Africa, including their healing rituals. Despite being a trained lawyer and working as such, he was also active as a dowser.

## 3. The Catholics

My family on my mother's side originates from Prague and the province of Upper Austria. My great-grandmother Theresia Spatzenegger, from Aigen/Schlegel in Upper Austria, became half-orphaned early in life when her father died at a relatively young age.[20] Belonging to an impoverished minor noble family, the abbot of the local Catholic abbey took guardianship over my great-grandmother and her brothers because women were not permitted to be legal guardians of their children at that time. As a result, the family was very Catholic. Despite her strong religious upbringing, she had a son with her lover and later husband and my great-grandfather, Karl Blazek, an ethnic Czech k.u.k.[21] military musician from Prague. She gave birth to their common child out of wedlock. This granduncle of mine, also named Karl Blazek, was likely ordained into the church to atone for the circumstances of his birth and became a monk in the Order of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Schulbrüder). They were based in Strebersdorf, Vienna, where they also ran a teacher training college. His brother, my grandfather Ernst Blazek, completed his teacher training there. The successor to this institution is today's University College of Education Vienna/Krems (KPH Wien/Krems) with its main campus in Strebersdorf, right next to the still-existing monastery of the congregation.

The strong Catholic influence on my grandfather's family prevented his planned marriage to a girl from Bad Goisern, where he had his first teaching position. This girl, to whom he was already engaged, belonged to the Protestant religion, which led my great-grandparents to exert great pressure on my grandfather to break

20 Mühlviertler Nachrichten, 4. Juli 1891, Linz, Rohrbach in Oberösterreich.

21 Short for kaiserlich und königlich and refers to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

off the engagement, which he eventually did. He later married my grandmother Edeltraut Werner, who belonged to the German ethnic group in what was then Czechoslovakia, formerly Bohemia, and today's Czech Republic[22]. She grew up and became a teacher in an environment heavily influenced by ideologies and nationalism[23], following the tradition of her family, in which teachers had existed for generations. After World War Two, all her family became victim to the ethnic cleansing[24] that happened in Czechoslovakia in 1945, following the so-called Benes Decrees.[25] In this process, my great-grandfather Josef Werner was beaten by a Czech mob so hard that he died days after. All the family of my grandmother lost their home and belongings and were never allowed to return to it.

During the clerical fascist dictatorship that preceded the National Socialist period in Austria, which intended to form a Catholic theocracy[26], my grandfather was politically active as a councillor for the then-unified party but, at the same time, was a strict anti-Nazi.

Johanna Spatzenegger, a niece of my great-grandmother mentioned above, from Upper Austria, whose strong Catholic upbringing also took on a strong nationalistic hue like that of my great-grandfather Robert Stanfel, married a worker from the City of Steyr in Upper Austria. He, August Eigruber, later became the Gauleiter of Oberdonau and a close personal friend of Adolf Hitler.[27]

## 4. My parents' "rebellion"

The marriage of my parents[28], who came from families strongly influenced by ideologies embedded in their respective religions—Protestant Christianity on the one hand and Catholic Christianity

22 Kingdom of Bohemia (Böhmen) 1198–1904, a crown land of the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy 1804–1918, Republic of Czechoslovakia 1918–1939, occupied by Nazi Germany 1938 (partly)–1945, Republic of Czechoslovakia 1945–1992, Czech Republic since 1993.

23 Eminger/Konrad/Šebek 2019, 90.

24 Münz 2002, 120 f.

25 Dvorak/Schriftl (with the co-work of Niklas Perzi), 123–231.

26 Haus der Geschichte Österreich n.d.

27 Goldberger/Sulzbacher n.d.

28 1967.

on the other—, was not welcomed by either family and was seen by them as a significant break from their familial ideologies. The resulting tensions were part of my childhood, even if they were not explicitly named as such.

As a child, I could certainly observe that there were attitudes among some family members that did not align with what I learned in school and were better left undiscussed, especially not about the affiliations with the NSDAP, the pre-ideological ideas of it, or the fact that the Gauleiter Eigruber was personally responsible for the Mauthausen concentration camp and the annihilation of "unworthy life" at Hartheim Castle, which was practically a "prototype" of mass extermination by gassing. Simultaneously, I was raised with a strong emphasis on religion and encouraged to internalise the moral values of Christianity, mainly by my mother, who herself had become a teacher due to her family tradition. The discrepancy between what I was being taught and the unspoken ideological framework, along with its contradictions, probably led me to seek something where I could live and experience my need for spirituality and faith free from these ideological undertones, which dominated my family's dealings with religion in the generations before me.

## 5. My personal "free" choice?

In my personal perception, I consciously chose the religion of Islam based on various facts and my acquaintance with practices from the spiritual tradition of Sufism, completely free from ideology or nationalism[29], and even today I still neither doubt nor regret my

29 I have to mention with gratitude the teacher of my professional education as a music therapist but also my spiritual teacher, the late Oruç Güvenç from Turkey, who himself came from a nationalistic family but widened his horizons to include Islamic mystics and Sufism. An interesting fact is that the man who first invited Oruç Güvenç from Istanbul to Vienna for a workshop, which was the preorganisation of the music therapy training that I completed later, was, according to his mother, conceived in the flat of my great-grandparents (Stanfel). His parents met there, as his father was a subtenant in my great-grandmother's flat after my great-grandfather had passed away. I would have never known all of these facts if it was not for this lady in 1993, when she was in a concert and read my name on the list of the musicians and remembered the name "Stanfel" and this story of hers.

decision. But in looking at the history of my family, I ask myself if it really was a completely free choice, especially as I became a teacher after so many generations of teachers before me.[30] Are there patterns concerning religion and ideology which have run throughout the generations of my family and influenced choices I have made subconsciously? Was my decision maybe a way to escape emotions from my family's past that were too overwhelming as well?

Later, as I realised, very similar ideologies to those I knew from my family are present even among some groups of Muslims, which could have continued the harmful traditions of ideologised religions of my family in my life as a Muslim. In my two marriages[31] with women from countries with predominantly Muslim populations, the first from Turkey and the second from the Muslim enclave of Sandžak in Serbia, I learned about how ideologisation was influenced by different historical circumstances in each country and its effects on many people's lives.

The fact that I have twice married women who are considered "strangers" in the society where I live may also be an antipode to what had been ideologically manifested in my family: to pretend to be in the "better" ethnic group, the German one. In my family, there is a history of one side being an ideological perpetrator and the other being a victim of ideology. Without doubt, both had an influence on many of my fundamental decisions in life, whether I realised this at that time or not. But at the same time, I was of course fully responsible for and aware of my decisions and had not felt pressure from anywhere to make them in a certain way.

30 Also, train management, lawyers and musicians were jobs on both sides of my family, but there is not enough space in this article to deal with these connections.

31 I am actually now married for a third time, but in each case, I got divorced before remarrying.

## 6. Transgenerational Trauma[32]

When something happens in a person's life that exceeds their ability to consciously perceive, process and understand it, it can lead to psychological trauma, which is officially addressed as an "acute stress reaction".[33] Such experiences are often suppressed and not recorded in the individual's conscious memory. Instead, the memory resides in the subconscious, where it can remain dormant for a long time, but it can resurface unexpectedly at any moment as a flashback, a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[34] Alternatively, the unresolved trauma may stay in the subconscious, influencing a person's decisions in ways they are unaware of, even though they believe these decisions to be well-considered and logical. When such individuals encounter situations that resemble their overwhelming experiences from the past, their reactions can appear illogical to outsiders. This is because they unconsciously link the current situation with the original traumatic event, leading to repetitive, almost automatic responses without them being aware of this.

These unprocessed psychological injuries, which arise from overwhelming situations, can also have other effects. They can manifest themselves as mental or physical illnesses, or in cases where the traumatic experiences involved violence, the former victims can become perpetrators themselves, often without recognising how their actions are connected to past events.

The theory that such traumas, if not personally processed—which is most effectively done with professional help and maybe a strong and reflective faith can also be helpful—, can be passed down to one's descendants is relatively recent. It is even possible that deep-seated traumas might alter a person's DNA, allowing these traumas to be transmitted through genetic inheritance.[35] Another form of transmission is through behavioural patterns related to specific issues and situations, which children adopt as role models and integrate into their own personalities. Thus, traumatic experiences can

32 See: Salberg/Grand 2024.

33 WHO-FIC: ICD10: QE48 Acute stress reaction.

34 WHO-FIC: ICD10: 6B40 Post traumatic stress disorder.

35 Byrne 2023.

continue to influence the lives of descendants, even after the person who experienced the trauma originally has passed away.

An experience leading to unprocessed trauma can take many forms. It could be a sudden, unexpected event, or it could involve repeated or systematic violence, which can be either physical, psychological or both. Trauma can stem from individual experiences or collective events. In cases of violent acts, both the victims and perpetrators can be traumatised. While this is more intuitively understood in relation to the victims, it is less obvious when it comes to the perpetrators. However, when one considers that committing a violent act requires suppressing one's own moral and guilty conscience, the potential for trauma becomes clearer. As mentioned earlier, violence is not always physically defined; psychological violence and even the creation of aggressive, demeaning or violence-prone ideologies also constitute forms of violence. Although these forms of violence are primarily conceptual, they are present, authentic and relevant in the moment of thought.

## 7. The personal impact of the transgenerational trauma

The strong ideological stance of my ancestors has been passed down to their descendants, whether consciously or unconsciously, up to my generation. This is evident in their similar approaches to religious questions and their incorporation into political contexts, as well as in my ancestors' continuous search for something "better" than their current belief or for an ideological approach to (or against) religion by almost every member of my family since then. Through accompanying my current wife, Friderica Magdalena Wächter-Stanfel, in exploring her family history and her recovery from the illness caused by it, in which her grandfather, SS General and war criminal Otto Wächter, plays a central role[36], I have seen firsthand how transgenerational trauma can deeply affect people's lives. She alleviated her heavy psychological illness by making herself conscious of her family history and by finding a spiritual

36 The story about Friderica Magdalena's family is told in Sands, Philippe: The Ratline 2020, and in translated versions in several languages and editions.

home in Islam.[37] Interestingly enough, the same thing happened to Helga Lilli Wolff, later known as Fatima Grimm[38], the daughter of General Wolff, a senior Wehrmacht and SS general, who partly worked closely with my wife's grandfather Otto Wächter.[39] Having been shaped by the experiences in my own family, I believe I have a certain sensitivity to ideologised religion, which of course is still alive around us and is a part of current political conflicts in many respects. The stance against religions or the ideologically driven urge to change or "reform" a religion according to external dictates must also be viewed from this perspective. I didn't know most of the facts about my great-grandfather and his ideological activities until a short while ago and had to find out most of them by myself.

The opposite of this is the story of my mother's family: The emotional traumatisation of my grandmother's family caused by the extermination was passed over to my mother and was also something I experienced in my childhood and youth through hearing these stories frequently and not being able to meet members of my family who had fled to what was to become the GDR (DDR)[40] behind the Iron Curtain. A personal symptom is that if I get information about a war or conflict which people have to flee from, these emotions from my youth become current again for me and I feel solidarity because I know what it means to be in a family in which such trauma was experienced, no matter the political or ideological reasons for it. So, emotionally I know, doing this is never just, never can be justified but doing it is always wrongdoing and a moral sin, not only against the actual people involved but also against the following generations.

Many people seem to be influenced by their ancestors' actions, often also without realising it. More people than one might think have unprocessed perpetrator traumas in their families. This is evi-

37 Lindahl 2023.

38 See: Schütt, Peter 2015. After reading this biography, my wife assumed that Fatima Grimm might have suffered from the same psychological disease that she had as a consequence of the very similar Nazi history in the family. A person who had known her confirmed this to me later in a written conversation.

39 Sands 2020, 114 f.

40 German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik), the name of communistic East Germany 1949–1989.

dent from the personal letters my wife receives from individuals she didn't previously know, who, inspired by her story, feel encouraged to explore their own family histories. However, this type of trauma is not limited to Austria and Germany and extends to current conflicts in the Middle East.[41] In all countries with past wars or violence, political upheaval, etc., there have been perpetrators and victims whose stories remain unprocessed and are passed down through generations.

## 8. Reflection from the perspective of teachers

Educators, particularly religious educators, should be aware of the multifaceted aspects of identity. The religious identity of an individual may have more complex backgrounds than what is superficially perceived. Personal choices for or against a religion can be influenced by various factors, with one's family history possibly playing a significant role. Educators should engage in reflective processes to become aware of the reasons behind their own religious inclinations and also understand that these kinds of factors may play a crucial role in shaping their students' perceptions and self-understanding of religion. Even conversion should be seen under the possible influence of dealing with a personal trauma, though it is mostly seen from the perspective of radicalisation as far as Islam is concerned.

Transgenerationally processed traumas can manifest themselves particularly in the religious and spiritual realms. Conversely, a truly spiritual approach, free from political ideology, can be a potential pathway to addressing and coping with these traumas. Actually, in teaching students with the experience of being on the run from war, violence and inhuman conditions for life, we must be aware that they or their families may have experienced multiple traumatic situations, which may not be recognised at first but may be stuck inside these students' souls and can break out at any time. But a trauma stemming from a perpetrator history in a family is also a possibility. Such traumas, for whatever reason, can affect someone's view and expression of religion. Giving caring attention to these issues and

41 Especially the matter of anti-Semitism among Muslims, see Stanfel n.d.

not only showing an awareness of religious and political radicalisation will become more and more important for teachers, especially teachers of religion.

The conclusions of this article are based on my personal family history, but they are not singular stories. Everywhere, people re-live stories about their ancestors, who are part of their identity, whether consciously or unconsciously. Often people don't know about these stories, or if they know, people may not be ready to talk about them for several reasons, may they be cultural, traditional or religious, and there might be a toxic silence in the society or the family in question. But especially in international exchange of teaching methods and ideas on education, focusing on these kinds of parts of a personal identity is becoming more relevant in understanding "one's own", "a foreign" and finally "a common" identity. As exchange between teachers and students is taking place and multiple lines of history and personal stories are meeting in today's academic and practical pedagogical work, at best, from several different countries, understanding personal backgrounds and being sensitive are more important than ever.

The general main issue in preventing people from feeling the need to deal with trauma seems to be to avoid the ideological adoption of religion and to be aware that spirituality and belief are at the centre of religion and its practice but not its misuse in ideological ways, whether it be in organised religions or in families and education. Otherwise, ideology can poison religion and cause traumatic events for individuals or groups, which can be passed on to several subsequent generations.

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*Melanie Gehrmann*

# Half a year in Innsbruck and my experiences with IMPACCT

In the winter semester 2023/2024, the IMPACCT project gave me the opportunity to study in Innsbruck for a semester. As I had always dreamed of living in the mountains since I was a little girl, it was a dream come true for me.

When planning my stay, I was lucky enough to have the IMPACCT team by my side every step of the way. At the beginning of a semester abroad, you have a lot of worries. How should I plan everything? Will I find accommodation? Can I get credit for the courses at my home university? Thanks to the project, I was not alone with all these thoughts. At the meetings with the student assistant, we were told how to draw up a learning agreement, how to contact the lecturers and when to look for accommodation. Ms Nierste and Ms Schäfer were always on hand to help us with the actual application process at the host university. Thanks to this support, you never felt that you were alone with the planning. Ms Ermert's practical course provided a great opportunity to exchange ideas with the other outgoing students. Especially in the primary school teaching degree programme, it is currently still a rarity to go abroad for a semester, so it was great to be able to exchange ideas through the practical course.

When the planning phase was over, I had to attend intercultural training shortly before my departure. To begin with, I did not see the point in this. Why did I need intercultural training? I was only going to a neighbouring German-speaking country. But during the training we also learnt what makes us and our background special, how this influences us in our interactions with other people and how we can combat prejudices. These were all points that helped me in living in a shared space in the hall of residence. I lived in a hall of residence with 17 other international students. There were 15 differ-

ent nationalities sharing one kitchen, so it is particularly important to understand other cultures in such a situation.

The hall of residence situation can also be linked to my expectations of the semester abroad. For me, the focus was on becoming more open and self-confident. I wanted a new environment, to meet new people and surpass myself. As I started studying straight after leaving school, it was important for me to see something different before I started working as a teacher. I also saw many opportunities for my future career in the chance to spend a semester abroad. As teachers, we are also confronted with many different cultures every day. A teacher is also characterised by a self-confident manner and a particularly high degree of openness. It was precisely in these areas that I hoped to further my education.

I was very lucky to meet lots of nice people right at the beginning of the semester. I quickly made friends through the Erasmus events, the hall of residence and my courses at the university, with whom I was able to share this experience. The semester flew by. I explored Innsbruck and the surrounding area, went paragliding with the Erasmus group, tried my flatmate's Chinese food, tried to teach international students German, often visited the Christmas market and celebrated the Iranian festival Yalda with my friend.

During my semester, I had an 'interim meeting' with the IMPACCT team. This gave me the opportunity to talk about my experiences and adventures. We talked about the teacher training programme in Austria, which is structured as a bachelor's and master's degree. You can already work as a teacher there after completing your bachelor's degree. The internships take place during the semester and not during the lecture-free period. I believe this is better at JLU, as you can concentrate fully on the tasks of the internship during the lecture-free period. The examination phase in Innsbruck is a lot more relaxed than at JLU. Although you take a lot of exams, you can easily postpone an exam for 2–3 weeks to avoid stress. In Innsbruck you do not need a sick note for this, and you always have 3–5 attempts to pass an exam. This is ideal for me as a very nervous person during exams.

I really appreciated the close supervision offered through the project. When you go abroad via another project, you have to organise some aspects completely on your own. Thanks to the support, I

was never alone with challenges; there was always someone to talk to.

On the one hand, Innsbruck is a very young city and, thanks to the university, also an international city. On the other hand, Innsbruck is also a very traditional city. This is particularly evident in the many cultural events and attractions on offer. A fond memory of mine is the Museum Night, when you could visit all the museums all night long with one ticket. Shopping weekends were also popular when traditional live music was played in all the department stores.

Looking back, I have to say that all my expectations were exceeded. At the beginning, I was worried that I would not make any friends and would not feel at home in Innsbruck. In those six months, I did not only made friends for life, but also found a place where I feel very comfortable and where I grew beyond myself. Living together in the dormitory with my Chinese flatmate and our communal kitchen prepared me especially well for the heterogeneity challenges at primary school. I think I have learnt a lot from the semester, especially for my future career. I have become more open, more spontaneous, and more self-confident. These are all qualities that I can benefit from in my future career. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to gain this experience and to take part in the IMPACCT project.

IMPACCT is a project in which the well-being of the students and their experiences are of great importance. It is not about good performance, but about experience and personal development, which is great!

*Selin Canim*

# Reflection: Istanbul

The IMPACCT project offers student teachers a unique opportunity to experience a semester abroad in a special way. With a structured programme that combines professional and intercultural preparation, on-site support and final reflection, it goes far beyond a normal exchange semester. From the very beginning, a special focus is placed on comprehensive support that assists and accompanies the students throughout the entire period. For me personally, this support was a great help and enabled me to experience my semester abroad not only in a professionally enriching way, but also in a safe and well-organised manner. Special thanks go to Ms Wiebke, whose tips and advice supported me at every stage, whether it was during the planning phase, during my stay in Istanbul or during the follow-up.

The combination of professional preparation and intercultural training proved to be enormously helpful. The events and discussions beforehand enabled me to familiarise myself intensively with the upcoming cultural exchange and prepare myself for a wide range of situations. The intercultural training not only gave me an introduction to the culture of Turkey, but also sensitised me to the diversity within and between cultures. I particularly appreciated the opportunity to ask questions, clarify uncertainties and receive support with formal matters, which made the entire process much easier.

The project context and the targeted preparation gave me a clear advantage over other students who had their experience abroad without such support. I already felt more confident and better prepared when I travelled to Istanbul. Even though I have Turkish roots and already know the country a little, I was able to gain many new perspectives on the culture thanks to the intercultural preparation. Especially as someone with a dual cultural background, it was interesting to observe how different everyday life and interaction in Turkey is compared to Germany—there are also many differences

between people with Turkish roots who grew up in Germany and the locals in Turkey, which are often not obvious at first glance.

My expectations for the semester abroad were high, and I can say that they were more than fulfilled. My aim was to really get to know the life and culture of the host country, both in terms of daily life and studying. This opportunity gave me a deep insight into the Turkish way of life and helped me grow both personally and professionally. Studying at the host university differed in many ways from the experience at JLU, and I found many similarities and differences between the two institutions. One important difference was that at JLU we often covered topics in the first semesters that are not introduced there until later. This gave me the opportunity to deepen my knowledge and expand it in dialogue with the local students.

Another central aspect of the IMPACCT project is the preparation given for working in heterogeneous classrooms. The intercultural exchange within the project sensitised me to the fact that cultural diversity exists not only between different nationalities, but also within a group of people from the same background. I realised that you cannot simply judge people by their origins, as each individual has their own perspective and way of life. This realisation will be of great importance for my future work in the classroom, as it is about recognising and appreciating diversity and differences—even if all students come from the same country.

Looking back, I can hardly see anything to criticise about my participation in the IMPACCT project. On the contrary, the comprehensive preparation and guidance were a unique advantage that students without this project context often did not have. The project enriched me in many ways and gave me a valuable perspective on living and studying in another culture, not only academically but also personally.

In terms of cultural and historical experiences, the semester abroad in Istanbul was extremely inspiring. Together with other students, we made it a habit to visit a new mosque or museum every Friday. Istanbul, known for its impressive architecture and many cultural sites, offered us a wealth of opportunities to discover the city's rich history and culture. We also explored other sights, such as the Princes' Islands, and experienced unforgettable moments to-

gether. These trips were not only culturally enriching but also led to close friendships that I still maintain today.

In addition to Istanbul, we also travelled to other parts of Turkey and discovered a variety of cities, including Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Diyarbakır, Rize, Trabzon, Giresun, Ordu and Samsun. Each of these cities offered its own cultural treasures, traditions and scenic highlights, and we were able to make memories on these trips that will stay with us for a lifetime. The hospitality we encountered everywhere was simply incredible. It was impressive to experience how warmly we were welcomed in every place and how proud the people were to share their culture and cuisine with us.

A particular highlight of these trips was definitely the Turkish cuisine. Whether regional specialities from Hatay or the typical desserts from Gaziantep, the food was simply delicious. Turkish cuisine is known worldwide for its variety and intensity of flavours, and we really felt it—even on the scales! After each trip, we felt like we brought a few extra kilos back with us, which just goes to show how much we enjoyed the food.

All of these experiences—the people, the culture, the landscapes and the incredible cuisine—had a profound impact on me and gave me new appreciation of the diversity and hospitality in Turkey.

The semester abroad was greatly beneficial for my future professional life. The experiences I had and the friendships I made during this time have enriched my network and motivated me to explore new avenues. Many of the friendships extend to different cities in Germany and beyond, which has meant that I have travelled a lot within Germany since my return. Meeting up with former fellow students in cities like Frankfurt, Cologne, Bremen and Berlin is still an integral part of my life today.

Overall, my semester abroad was an unforgettable time that broadened my horizons and gave me a lot of valuable experience for my future career as a teacher. It was enriching in every way, and I am grateful that I was able to take advantage of this opportunity through the IMPACCT project.

*Ian Runte*

# From a semester abroad to working as a student assistant

## How Stockholm broadened my pedagogical perspective

The internationalisation of teacher training is becoming increasingly important in our globalised world. As a prospective primary school teacher specialising in German, mathematics and Islamic religion, I had the unique opportunity to spend a semester abroad at Stockholm University in Sweden in the summer semester of 2022. This semester did not only enrich me academically but also had a lasting impact on my subsequent work as a student assistant in the IMPACCT project. In the following, I would like to reflect on my experiences in Stockholm and show how they have significantly influenced my work in the project.

My decision to spend a semester abroad in Stockholm was facilitated by the IMPACCT project, an innovative programme that prepares student teachers for the challenges and opportunities of a heterogeneous classroom. In Stockholm, I immersed myself in an education system characterised by openness, innovation and a strong intercultural focus. The university actively encouraged exchange between students from different cultures, which resulted in a vibrant and diverse learning environment.

One formative experience was participating in a practical course on intercultural pedagogy. In this practical course, various models and theories were presented that emphasised the importance of cultural diversity in the educational process. I learnt how cultural differences in the classroom can not only be taken into account but actively used as an asset. Through case studies and group work, this practical course raised my awareness of the specific needs of students from different cultural backgrounds and showed me practical ways to promote inclusion and equal opportunities in the classroom.

In addition, living in Sweden allowed me to familiarise myself with the country's language, history and culture. I took part in traditional festivals such as the Midsummer Festival, visited museums such as the Vasa Museum and explored historical sites. My regular exchange with local students and fellow international students deepened my understanding of a multicultural society and the importance of openness and tolerance. These intercultural experiences not only broadened my personal horizons but also provided valuable inspiration for my teaching practice.

After returning to Justus Liebig University, Giessen, I started working as a student assistant on the IMPACCT project in the winter semester of 2023. My main task was to accompany and support future outgoing students. I was able to draw directly on my own experiences to help others prepare for their semester abroad. I supported them by answering organisational questions, helped them choose suitable courses and gave them tips on living and studying abroad.

The intercultural skills I had gained abroad proved invaluable for this job. I organised meetings and informative events where I gave practical tips and prepared students for possible challenges, such as cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers or bureaucratic hurdles. I also promoted dialogue between former and future exchange students in order to create a supportive network in which experiences could be shared and questions answered.

Another focus of my work was public relations work for the IMPACCT project. In seminars and lectures, I gave presentations about my experiences and was available to answer questions. I created posts for social media such as Instagram to pique students' interest. My authentic reporting about my time in Stockholm, including photos and personal anecdotes, helped to emphasise the importance of international mobility in the teacher training programme and to dispel any fears or reservations.

My experiences in Stockholm had a direct influence on my work for the IMPACCT project. Through the semester abroad, I developed a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with studying abroad. These include adapting to a new system and dealing with cultural differences. This understanding helped me to better recognise students' needs and offer them targeted support. Understanding different communication styles, values and norms is essential to avoid misunderstandings and facili-

tate successful interactions. I used these insights in my meetings to prepare the students not only professionally but also personally for their stay abroad. For example, we discussed cultural differences in teaching and learning methods or dealing with authorities.

My time in Sweden also helped me to react flexibly and creatively to new situations. Whether it was communicating in a foreign language, overcoming unexpected challenges in everyday student life or finding my way around a new city, adaptability was always required. These qualities were not only essential for my work for the IMPACCT project but will also be of great benefit to me as a future teacher. The problem-solving skills I strengthened abroad proved to be a valuable resource in my project work and will also help me in my future career to respond to the individual needs of my students.

The combination of a semester abroad and subsequent project work was extremely enriching for my personal and professional development. I now feel better prepared to manage a diverse classroom and to cater to students from different cultural backgrounds. My intercultural experiences have had a lasting impact on my pedagogical approach, diversified my teaching methods and heightened my sensitivity to diversity. I am convinced that these skills will be invaluable in everyday school life in order for me to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Working as a student assistant also enabled me to actively contribute to the internationalisation of the teacher training programme. It was extremely fulfilling to see how my work helped others to have similar positive experiences and develop their own intercultural competences. I am convinced that projects such as IMPACCT make an important contribution to equipping future teachers for the demands of a diverse society and thus increasing the quality of the education system as a whole.

In conclusion, I can say that my journey from Stockholm back to university has come full circle. The experiences I gained abroad have enriched my work for the project, and working as a student assistant has enabled me to pass these experiences on to others. I hope that I can continue to help promote internationalisation in education in the future and inspire others to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a semester abroad, because only by living international experiences can we as teachers contribute to promoting an open, tolerant and diverse society.

*Fiona Metsch*

# Report of Experiences—Innsbruck

My participation in the IMPACCT exchange programme and my semester abroad at Leopold-Franzens University in Innsbruck were an incredibly enriching experience. In order to reflect on this experience, I would like to look at various aspects separately.

## 1. The IMPACCT Project

In the course of the project, there were various measures to prepare for, accompany and follow up on the semester abroad.

For example, I attended the practical course *The Intercultural Dimension in the Didactics of Islamic Religious Education* as preparation. Although the focus of the practical course was more on Islamic religion and did not correspond directly to my subject of ethics, I was able to take away valuable knowledge. Dealing with Islam broadened my horizons and will be useful to me as a prospective ethics teacher in a multicultural society. The intensive study of Austria and the textbook analyses were particularly helpful. These tasks gave me cultural insights and valuable knowledge for my future teaching. Overall, the seminars were very useful for my professional and intercultural preparation as well as for my future professional practice as a teacher.

In the intercultural training, I learnt a lot about potential problems that can arise during a semester abroad or when dealing with a different culture. It was emphasised that such challenges are normal, which gave me a sense of security and understanding. Although I did not experience a real culture shock in Austria due to its cultural similarity to Germany, this training was still very valuable. It helped me to better understand the perspective of people coming into a new culture. These insights are particularly important for my future everyday life as a teacher, as I can now better understand how pupils

who come to Germany from other cultures feel. My semester abroad not only prepared me for my future career as a teacher in terms of my subject, but also interculturally and emotionally.

The counselling sessions during my stay in Innsbruck provided me with important support. The opportunity to talk to the permanent staff and address challenges directly gave me a lot of confidence. Uncertainties, problems and organisational issues could be clarified directly.

The final talks after my return enabled me to reflect on my experiences and prepare me for my return to everyday life as a student in Germany. They also gave me the opportunity to critically scrutinise and evaluate my personal and academic development during my stay.

Overall, I found the measures used in the IMPACCT project very useful. They offered comprehensive support from preparation to follow-up and ensure that a student's experience abroad not only remains a personal experience but is also academically and culturally rooted. I can definitely see the advantages of the project context compared to students whose experience abroad did not take place as part of such a project. While others may be left to their own devices, I was always able to count on support thanks to the structured guidance. The IMPACCT programme gave me not only organisational but also emotional security, which undoubtedly made my stay in Innsbruck more enjoyable and successful. In addition, the targeted preparation and continuous support enabled me to experience my time abroad in a more intensive and reflective way.

## 2. My Expectations

I went into my semester abroad in Innsbruck with great expectations. I hoped to gain new experiences both academically and culturally and to broaden my perspectives. I was particularly keen on familiarising myself with the Austrian education system and discovering new teaching methods for my future career as a teacher. I also expected to strengthen my intercultural skills and immerse myself in everyday life and culture in Austria. Looking back, I can say that many of these expectations were fulfilled. Academically, I gained valuable insights into the Austrian educational landscape, especially

by analysing textbooks and having direct contact with students and teachers on site. These experiences have broadened my understanding of different approaches in the teaching profession and will support me in my future career as a teacher.

Culturally, I quickly settled into Innsbruck. Austria's cultural similarities to Germany made it easier for me to get started, but at the same time I was also able to discover differences that honed my intercultural skills. One area in which my expectations were not fully met was the more intensive exchange with the local population I had hoped for. This could be due to the fact that Innsbruck is a very international city and that I especially met other exchange students. Nevertheless, I gained valuable insights into the Austrian way of life through my contact with locals.

Overall, I can say that my semester abroad in Innsbruck largely fulfilled my expectations and offered me new perspectives and valuable experiences in many respects.

## 3. Comparison of the Universities

During my semester abroad at Leopold-Franzens University in Innsbruck, I noticed some similarities but also interesting differences to the teacher training programme at JLU. These experiences have shown me what I particularly appreciate about the teacher training programme at JLU and where there is room for improvement.

In many areas, the teacher training programmes at both universities are similar. Both at JLU and in Innsbruck, the courses mainly consist of seminars and lectures, which are similarly structured. The requirements in the seminars, such as presentations, homework and discussions, are comparable. The examination formats in the lectures, especially written examinations, are also common in both systems.

One major difference was the grading system. At Leopold-Franzens University, students are graded on a scale of 1 to 5, in contrast to the 1–15 points at JLU. I was particularly positively surprised by the easier communication via e-mail with the lecturers in Innsbruck. Replies were often quicker, which made the exchange easier. You were also given the opportunity to take part

in seminars online if you were ill. This meant I was able to take part in lessons without being physically present and avoid absences. What confused me about the university and the courses on offer to begin with was that there are courses that are offered at the other institution, the University of Teacher Education Tyrol. However, the latter cooperates with the University of Innsbruck, and it is possible to take a course offered at this university without any problems.

Despite these differences, I really appreciate the teacher training programme at JLU. The solid structure of the seminars and lectures as well as the familiar examination formats offer reliable orientation within the programme. However, based on my experience abroad, I would like to see more flexibility in attending courses at JLU, similar to what was the case in Innsbruck. The option of attending online when you are ill could also be introduced at JLU. In addition, faster and more straightforward communication with lecturers, as I experienced in Innsbruck, could improve the support and exchange at JLU. Overall, the semester abroad broadened my view of the teacher training programme and showed me how important it is to keep what is tried and tested, but also to be open to change in order to make the programme even more effective and accessible.

## 4. Intercultural Classroom

The IMPACCT project aims to prepare student teachers specifically for the heterogeneous classroom. Thanks to my semester abroad in Innsbruck, I now feel much better prepared in this respect, although I didn't have any extreme intercultural experiences myself. The cultural similarities between Austria and Germany ensured that there were no major cultural shocks. Nevertheless, I was able to experience a lot of heterogeneity through my exchange with international students and thus learn to understand them better.

My encounters with students from different countries were particularly valuable. I became close friends with a fellow student from Israel and made a friend from France and another from Italy. These diverse contacts helped me to better recognise the challenges and opportunities of a multicultural environment. Even though the differences between the cultures were sometimes subtle, they heightened my awareness of how important it is to develop an awareness

of cultural differences and to take them into account in pedagogical practice.

Through these experiences, I now feel better prepared to teach in a classroom with students from different cultural backgrounds. I have learnt how important it is to consider different perspectives and create an atmosphere in which all students feel understood and valued. My semester abroad made me even more aware of the importance of diversity in the classroom and prepared me both professionally and personally to successfully integrate this heterogeneity into my future teaching career.

## 5. Criticism

Looking back, I can see one point that could be optimised as part of the IMPACCT project: The content preparation could have been a little more tailored to the different specialisms of the participants. Although I was able to take a lot away from the focus on Islamic religion, it would have been helpful if the selection of topics had been broader in order to better support my specialisation in ethics. Overall, however, the experience was very enriching, and the intercultural aspects also gave me valuable insights for my future career.

## 6. Experiences

During my semester abroad in Innsbruck, I came into contact with the history, language, religion and culture of Austria in many different ways.

My involvement with the history surrounding the Bergisel and the battles that took place there was particularly formative. The historical significance of this place, combined with the Tyrolean fight for freedom, has deepened my understanding of regional history. I also realised the connection to Walter von der Vogelweide, an important medieval poet, through the Walterpark in Innsbruck.

Austria is strongly characterised by Catholic tradition, which is clearly evident in its everyday life and architecture. I also had my first intensive contact with Islamic students in my seminars, which broadened my horizons. A seminar on Islamic art was particularly

exciting, in which I learnt a lot about Islamic calligraphy and the art of writing—topics that I had hardly come into contact with before.

I noticed some differences in the language, especially Austrian terms for German words. For example, cream is called "Sahne" in Germany and "Obers" in Austria. The Austrian desire to differentiate themselves linguistically from Germany was also interesting to experience and gave me a better understanding of Austria's regional identity.

## 7. Review

I am convinced that my semester abroad has made an extremely positive contribution to my future professional life.

Studying at Leopold-Franzens University in Innsbruck has broadened my knowledge considerably, especially through my intensive study of the Austrian education system and its specific teaching methods. Analysing textbooks and gaining insights into local teaching practice have provided me with valuable perspectives for my future teaching.

The intercultural experience and my exchange with international students have strengthened my ability to adapt and be sensitive to different cultural backgrounds. These skills are particularly important for teaching in a diverse classroom as they will help me to respond to the different needs and perspectives of my future students.

The practical experience of interacting with students from different countries and participating in projects and seminars together has improved my teamwork and communication skills. These international contacts have also given me a better understanding of the challenges that students from different cultural contexts can experience.

Overall, my semester abroad enriched my professional and personal development and prepared me comprehensively for the demands of the teaching profession.

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