

Dialogue and Perspective

Thoughts on Interaction between Interreligious Learning and Proactive Tolerance

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1. Introduction

“Interreligious learning is only possible on the basis of a fundamental respect for the irreducible and unique alterity of the other. Interreligious learning implies the idea that, from the very start, human beings are dialogical and relational in nature (Buber) and that in the dialogical encounter the other is both vulnerable and my teacher (Levinas).”¹

When Didier Pollefeyt brings up the fundamental respect for the otherness of the other as the basis of interreligious learning, he implicitly talks about tolerance. As an epistemic prerequisite that the religion, the faith of the other is to be respected and might even have some added value for me as a learner, it initially enables learning from that other person. While a passive tolerance which simply condoning others indifferently is not sufficient for this – “to condone means to insult”², Goethe already knew, and should “really only be a temporary attitude”³ – to learn from others requires the reciprocal recognition of the possibility to find truth in the other person. While the respect for the other can be found in an active tolerance being the necessary requirement, the appreciation and recognition that this other truth might have some added value for me as a learner is to be called proactive tolerance.⁴

Interreligious learning and the concept of proactive tolerance are therefore united in this article. The conditional possibility of all interreligious learning is a tolerance that not just condones but shows interest in the other whilst an existing rejection is diametrically opposed to the learning process. Proactive tolerance is therefore both a prerequisite and the result

1 Pollefeyt 2007: VII.

2 Goethe 1998: 385 (translation L.M./A.S.).

3 Ibid.

4 See the concept of proactive tolerance of Markus Vogt and Rolf Husmann in: Vogt/Husmann 2019: 3–16.

of interreligious learning. In order to pursue this thesis, the model of interreligious learning and its foundations are outlined below from a Catholic Christian perspective, starting with a brief review of its development. In a second step an example of a concept of interreligious learning from religious education in Germany is given, in order to illustrate its link with proactive tolerance. In a final summarizing step, the opportunities as well as the limits of interreligious learning as part of the formation of pro-active tolerance are to be discussed.

2. Context of interreligious learning

A migration society, as it is existing in Germany since the 1970s at the latest, is characterized by its plurality formed by various cultures and religions. In order to achieve a conflict-free coexistence, it is important to organize this tangible plurality without falling into indifference towards the other. One building block to initiate this process towards peaceful coexistence can be interreligious learning.⁵ Due to globalization, this learning process sees itself in an increasingly changing situation: other religions and cultures are no longer foreign rites and customs in other foreign countries or continents but are part of everyday life. One does no longer encounter the foreign just in books, but as a visible different religiosity in public and related to school “in more or less familiar – classmates”⁶. This once again confirms the necessity of interreligious learning.⁷ In this context, Karl Ernst Nipkow even speaks of a paradigm shift that necessitates “interaction *between* members of different religions instead of just an instruction *about* them”⁸.

5 For a discussion of the terms “interreligious learning”, “interreligious competence” and “interreligious education” see also: Sajak 2018: 24–34. In the following, the term “interreligious learning” is used, which aims to develop “interreligious competence” through knowledge building, encounters and dialogue and is thus committed to interreligious education as a whole. The aim is always the interreligious dialogue anchored in practice.

6 Dressler 2003: 113–124, here 114 (translation L.M./A.S.).

7 In addition to the ability to deal with pluralized societies, Unser 2021: 281f. following Schweitzer 2014: 14 sees the subjective need for orientation of all people as the second important reasoning context of interreligious learning. Thus (religious pluralization) leads not only to social, but also to individual movements for clarification and finding meaning, which make interreligious learning just as essential and thus assign it not only a social, but also an existential relevance.

8 Nipkow 2005: 362–380, here 362 (emphasis in the original, translation L.M./A.S.).

On the basis of respect and appreciation, interreligious learning can lead not only to tolerating people of other religions, but to value them as enriching. Since one's own identity is always shaped by externality, interreligious learning also helps to form and consolidate one's own religious or philosophical point of view.⁹ In turn, a firm perspective and identity enable proactive tolerance, as it causes the perception of otherness not as a threat, but as an expansion and enrichment of one's (religious and philosophical) horizons. That being said, interreligious learning – in the spirit of the concept of proactive tolerance – is not about developing an equal validity of alien truth and values. Rather what is needed, as Christoph Gellner and Georg Langenhorst put it, is a “tolerance of strength, which enables from a consciously accepted openness to differences and the knowledge of non-negotiable dissent in ultimate beliefs a mutual recognition, respect and approval of the other.”

3. *Developments in religious education – From the difference to the common*

As a religious educational concept, interreligious learning is relatively young: While the 1960s were characterized by an “apologetically contrasting perspective”¹⁰ on other religions, religious education in Germany in the 1970s and 80s reacted to the theological paradigm changes through the second Vatican Council in focusing their similarities.¹¹ Above all, Johannes Lähnemann put forward that interreligious learning previously based purely on theoretical knowledge has developed into learning about witnesses and encounters, always aiming for dialogue. This type of interreligious learning addresses the existential discussion of truth, rites and customs of other religions. While the starting point is your own religion or denomination¹² the aim is to enable learners to deal constructively with an increasing (religious) plurality within society, to perceive it as appreciative and to relate to it.¹³ This is to be achieved by developing a well-founded ability to make judgments and change perspectives.¹⁴ This

9 See: Vogt/Thurner 2018.

10 Schambeck 2013: 58 (translation L.M./A.S.).

11 See e.g.: Lähnemann 1986 und Lähnemann 1986a.

12 See: Unser 2021: 280–291.

13 See: Ibid. 280f.

14 See: Unser 2019: 107–109.

idea of interreligious learning prevails to this day – in various nuances.¹⁵ In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* this approach of interreligious dialogue is anchored as a fundamental method of Catholic social teaching.¹⁶

From a catholic perspective interreligious learning gains its theological legitimation through Vatican II (in particular: *Nostra Aetate* 2, 1965) with the introduction of an inclusive view on other religions.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Catholicism as well as all monotheistic religions struggle with their absoluteness and claimed truth on one hand and the concept of tolerance on the other. There is doubt “whether the inclusivist position really contributes to the theological legitimation of interreligious learning [...]. Because in other religions no truth can be learned about God that is not already laid out in Christianity. So why interreligious learning?”¹⁸ That being said, Alexander Unser follows von Stosch¹⁹ and Meyer²⁰, who advocate to not strictly distinct between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, but rather identify moments or aspects in all religions, which can be interpreted exclusively, inclusively and plurally. As a result, a comparison is shifted from the level of the belief systems, which tend to contrast various truths of faith, to the level of religious practice. Unser exemplifies this by relating to the interreligious and conflictive discussion on the sonship of Christ which is held on the level of the belief systems. In order to make interreligious learning profitable and to initiate a dialogue, one should not concentrate on that very question but on the religious practices appreciating Jesus in Islam as well as in Christianity.²¹ The aim is to “enable an undisguised view of similarities and differences against the background

15 The individual concepts of interreligious learning will not be discussed at this point. In addition to Johannes Lähnemann's dialogic world religion didactics, the UK-based approach of a distinction between “learning about religion” and “learning from religion” (learning from religion for one's own search and questions) is worth mentioning. See: Grimmitt 1977 and Grimmitt/Grove/Hull/Spencer 1991, who also shaped many concepts of interreligious learning in continental Europe. Schambeck 2013 offers a detailed overview of the diachrone and partly also synchronous development of interreligious learning.

16 See: FT.

17 For the religious theological solutions of the 20th century, see: Stosch 2012. For a further discussion on the special triple scheme of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism that has become popular in German-speaking countries, see also: Allemann 2011: 31–52.

18 Unser 2021: 280–291 (translation L.M./A.S.).

19 See: Stosch 2012.

20 See: Meyer 2019: 91.

21 See: Unser 2021: 284.

of the use of religious terms and sentences.”²² Interreligious learning is therefore less of a theological discourse of dogmatic theory than of lived practice.

4. *Interreligious learning as a contribution to proactive tolerance*

4.1 *Of encounters and testimonies*

Religious learning can be realized as encounter learning which includes to learn from the “testimony” of the other. Building on the British approach “A gift to the child”, Clauß Peter Sajak spells out such a testimony in his work “Kippa, Kelch, Koran”²³ using elementary objects from various religions for religious education in schools. This kind of testimony has the advantage of being easily available, while the actual physical interreligious encounter requires the presence of people.²⁴ The objects must meet the requirement to be exemplary for religion, evoke a feeling for holiness, have a spiritual component and be relevant to the learners. Sajak declares life-relevant testimonies suitable, which in the sense of existential relevance can also be encountered in everyday life.²⁵ He defines four phases in which learning of testimony takes place: In phase one, the interest or so-called inner participation of the learner is awakened, while phase two moves on to discovering and exploring the subject. The third phase can be described with the concept of contextualization, in which further information on the object of cult is provided for the first time. In phase four as a phase of reflection there finally follows the link between testimony and living environment.²⁶

22 Unser 2021: 284 (translation L.M./A.S.).

23 Sajak 2010.

24 Stephan Leimgruber pursues the approach of encounter learning as he focuses on meeting people, which he calls the “royal road to interreligious learning”, Leimgruber 2012: 24. A detailed description of this approach and possible criticism cannot be presented at this point. For critical comments that relate, among other things, to the conditions of interreligious learning in religious instruction in schools and to possible pitfalls in encounters, see: Zimmermann 2015: 43–45 and Langenhorst 2012: 124f.

25 See.: Sajak 2010: 45–48.

26 See: Ibid.

The goal of such witnessing is another important component of interreligious learning as it aims for the ability to engage in dialogue.²⁷ Such an approach is deeply committed to the understanding of tolerance as a communicative phenomenon outlined by Vogt and Husmann.²⁸ Not only (first) encounters with other religions through certain cult objects are made possible, but communicative processes towards peaceful coexistence are promoted and demanded. Tolerance presents itself as a conditional willingness to learn, while at the same time – because of the phases passed through – it has to be understood in the sense of Vogt/Husmann as an “unfinished dynamic and process of constant intensification”²⁹.

4.2 *Tolerance as a condition and goal*

The relationship between tolerance and interreligious learning is seen as a kind of hermeneutic circle: The prerequisite for interreligious learning is a tolerant willingness to engage in dialogue, which, when encouraged by learning, in turn leads to new understanding and thus initiates dialogue opportunities.

The dialogue is not only an important part of interreligious learning, but also ideally, “open and honest”³⁰, of proactive tolerance. All interreligious learning processes focus dialogue, whether they are primarily devoted to testimony and encounter learning or narrative approaches such as those presented by Gellner/Langenhorst³¹ or Zimmermann³². They all initiate a dialogue which, in the spirit of developing proactive tolerance, intends to break down prejudices and promote openness towards the supposedly foreigner.³³

The German Bishops' Conference (DBK) defined in 1991 dialogues in interreligious learning to be based on the principle of reciprocity.³⁴ The DBK stated that reciprocal communication must take place on an equal

27 Learning from testimony can thus be understood as enabling of or disinhibiting for encounter learning, since the religion of the other is no longer confronted as unknown.

28 See: Vogt/Husmann 2019: 8.

29 Vogt/Husmann 2019: 9 (translation L.M./A.S.).

30 Vogt/Husmann 2019: 8 (translation L.M./A.S.).

31 See: Gellner/Langenhorst 2013.

32 See: Zimmermann 2015.

33 See: Unser 2021: 286.

34 See: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 1991: 9.

footing (criterion 1), must be based on an attitude of respect and the friendship (criterion 2) and is led with the aim of understanding each other and believing them to be true (criterion 3). What applies here to the interreligious dialogue equally applies, according to Vogt and Husmann, to the development of a proactive tolerance that involves all participants in a mutual communication process on an equal level. This communication process can in turn be opened and practiced through interreligious learning.³⁵

4.3 A Change of perspective as the goal of the learning process

The ability to change perspective as a further relevant dimension of interreligious learning is already evident in the previous sections. It is to be understood as a figure of educational theory that aims to become aware of and reflect on internal and external perspectives. Such a perspective assumption is therefore an epistemic act that can be practiced and implemented at every stage of human development. The competence to change perspective is not about generating empathy, compassion or pity, but rather reaching a level of meta-reflection on which the feelings of the other person can be cognitively developed and understood.³⁶ In order to establish fair rules and thus to be able to organize peaceful coexistence, especially in a plural society, the competence to change perspective is inevitably required. In accordance with Vogt and Husmann, this does not mean “unlimited acceptance”³⁷, but rather a cooperation on an equal footing. Therefore, the competence to take on perspectives is the basis for the development and successful establishment of a code for social coexistence. Interreligious learning can promote this competence to enable a togetherness and to promote the development of a proactive tolerance.³⁸

35 Worth mentioning in this context is the Hamburg model of religious education “Religionsunterricht für alle 2.0”, which tries to combine dialogical and interreligious learning by offering interreligious rather than denominational classes. See also as an example: Knauth 2020: 293–324 and Kuhlmann 2020: 315–330. The extent to which such religious education can be particularly conducive to peace cannot be assessed to this extent and is therefore a major research desideratum.

36 See: Bloch 2018: 106f.

37 Vogt/Husmann 2019: 9 (translation L.M./A.S.).

38 See as well: Kenngott 2012.

5. *Limits of the concepts*

5.1 *Excessive expectations: Interreligious learning as the sole savior*

Even if the relevance of interreligious learning cannot be denied, it still remains a singular concept on the way to a proactive tolerance.³⁹ On the one hand, not only religious, but also cultural plurality leads to different ideas and opinions, which is why not only religious rites, customs, etc., but also cultural identities have to be considered to approach peaceful and inclusive coexistence. The increasingly diffuse and multi-layered relationship between culture and religion makes interreligious learning more difficult, so that it sometimes can lead to nowhere. Interreligious learning alone cannot change behavior or attitudes, but is often overloaded with such demands and unrealistic objectives which can lead to disappointment. Additionally, due to concrete contextual conditions, interreligious learning can become considerably more difficult. In particular, as Grümme points out, in practical work with refugees interreligious learning often cannot be realized due to various trauma. In the specific context of the integration and inclusion of refugees, interreligious learning is therefore faced with special challenges and should not be overloaded with expectations. Here it seems more important to act step by step and first enable the refugees to arrive instead of confronting them with religious plurality right away. This also applies in particular to school children who have fled.⁴⁰

5.2 *The question of identity: interreligious learning and the concept of home*

In many cases the accusation persists that interreligious learning prevents or makes it more difficult to find a home in one's own religion or denomination and leads to an indifferent attitude towards it. However, if one takes interreligious learning seriously in the sense presented here, this reproach does not apply. Just as tolerance can be recognized as a concept of conflict and, in the best case scenario, a constructive dynamic can grow from it,⁴¹ interreligious learning is only possible if different, already developed opinions, attitudes and values enter the dialogue as firm identities. Interreligious learning that does not seek to deal with one's own religious

39 See: Sajak 2018: 9–11 and Grümme 2017: 202f.

40 See: Grümme 2017: 202f.

41 See: Vogt/Husmann 2019: 7.

traditions beforehand can neither be constructive nor aim at developing proactive tolerance in the spirit of Vogt / Husmann.⁴²

5.3 Actual results? The problem of the measurability of attitudes and values

A far greater problem arises with regard to the measurability of results. Interreligious learning aims at acquiring knowledge about other religions, which can be measured relatively easy, but primarily is about the formation of attitudes and values, such as the willingness to dialogue, to take a perspective or to develop a proactive tolerance. In recent years now, religious education is asked how adequately it can be demonstrated whether these goals are actually being achieved. According to the problem of measurability, the number of studies is relatively small.⁴³ In their study from 2017, Schweitzer, Bräuer and Boschki looked at interreligious learning in job-oriented education and found out that a change in the categories of religion-related knowledge, religion-related perspective and religion-related settings can definitely be established.⁴⁴ Another example is Unser who in his dissertation published in 2019 investigates the question of whether interreligious learning does not suffer from an “educational and civic milieu constriction”⁴⁵ and whether the socio-economic status of the family of origin and gender have an effect. As a result, he showed that gender has little impact compared to the socio-economic origin which has an ambivalent influence.⁴⁶ These factors also play a role in the measurability of the results of interreligious learning. So whether the concept of interreligious learning can have a positive influence on the development of proactive tolerance cannot be conclusively verified. Nevertheless, main parts of interreligious learning match with the concept described by Vogt and Husmann and can therefore strengthen it.

42 See: Sorg 2020: 51–56.

43 See: Unser 2021: 288f.

44 See: Schweitzer/Bräuer/Boschki 2017: 133–138.

45 Unser 2019: 288 (translation L.M./A.S.).

46 See: Unser 2019: 317–322.

6. Summary

When interreligious learning subscribes to the paradigm of interreligious dialogue, when its goal and starting point is the development of a well-founded and reflected point of view of the learner and when principles such as reciprocity are taken into account, it nevertheless seems to be a profitable concept towards peaceful coexistence in an increasingly plural society. It is therefore an important component in the development of proactive tolerance and paves the way to a pluralistic togetherness in appreciation and respect, in exchange and in dialogue.

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