

**Blurred Boundaries: Inter-religious Education
at the Intersection of the Global and the Local**

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ABSTRACT

That inter-religious education must attend to the pupils' immediate life-world and the religious context in which they are set in, is widely accepted among teachers and scholars of Religious Education. However, current contextual approaches have yet to fully assimilate the "glocal" configuration of religion in the twenty-first century. Drawing upon the day-to-day reality of inter-religious education in Berlin, this paper sets out to develop a preliminary understanding of the "new contextuality" under the impact of globalization. First it outlines a sociological framework for describing the interpenetrative simultaneity of the global and the local in contemporary multi-religious settings as well as in the life-world of young people today-with reference to Roland Robertson's and Peter Peyer's pioneering studies on globalization and religion. In a next step these spatial transformations are being highlighted from a cultural point of view: How do they affect the individual constructions of identity and alterity among growing ups? In engaging with current German theories of intercultural hermeneutics and education, the paper seeks tentative answers to the initial question of inter-religious education at the intersection of the global and the local. In the end an empirical research perspective is presented: The co-presence of the global and local in the symbolic

worlds of contemporary young people becomes visible and empirically traceable in the individual spatial arrangements of their own rooms.

Beirut in Berlin? The Presence of the Remote in the Context of Inter-Religious Education

In school year 2008-9, a remarkable school project took place at the Kurt-Löwenstein Upper Secondary in Berlin-Neukölln (cf. Sajak & Muth, 2011). Ninth-year students, predominantly Christian and Muslim, spent an entire school year studying the Abrahamic religions. The educational process deliberately focused on the life-world experiences of the youths. They interviewed each other and also integrated the family environment of each respondent into a video documentary. In a further step, the dialogue was extended to include adherents of Judaism. The plan was to visit a Jewish youth centre to converse with Jewish peers. However, this unleashed unexpectedly fierce opposition; given the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, some Muslim students categorically refused to meet with their Jewish peers. A carefully prepared process of inter-religious education, which had been enriching up to that point, was threatening to fail because of a conflict that seemed to have nothing to do with the immediate reality in the local environment of students.

I have just concisely defined a learning process that largely corresponds to the current “state of the art” in religious education. Inter-religious education is here decisively student-centred. The central question of how people of different religious backgrounds and affiliation can live together in mutual respect and tolerance was not abstractly handled but instead taken to the very concrete realm of the everyday lives of these students and the world in which they live. Yet the attempt to create bridges to the multi-religious context of the lives of the youths ended in a communicative deadlock. Why?

One possible explanation arises when this didactic process is examined from a spatial perspective. Apparently, the conceptually crucial context of this school project was initially the

local environment of the students, the social sphere they interact on a daily basis. However, as the instruction unfolded, it turned out that this presupposition did not apply to some of the youths. The locally arranged encounter failed because of a religiously charged conflict at the global level; it could be said that Berlin became overshadowed by Beirut. If this diagnosis were correct, this small conflict would be an impetus to more thoroughly consider how the spatial compression of the world affects the religious identity and inter-religious education of today's youth.

That's the question I want to issue in this article. First, from a sociological perspective, I briefly examine how the everyday context of inter-religious education has been transformed by processes of globalization in order to then determine how these changes have affected the life views of the students themselves. After that I attempt to outline a research perspective that concretely addresses the effects cultural and religious globalization has on identity constructions of today's youth and that also enables empirical analysis on this matter. All this is done in close connection with the conflict just described.

The “New Contextuality”: Inter-Religious Education in the Tension between the Global and the Local

Why is it advisable to interpret the situation in Berlin-Neukölln from the theoretical perspective of globalization? Compared to other popular models for interpreting social, cultural and religious change-secularization, individualization, pluralization etc. -, the framework of globalization has one distinct advantage; it includes a spatial perspective on religious change and the transformation of the everyday life of youths (Simojoki, 2012). The global approach emphasises exactly those issues that broke out as a conflict in the school project described above-the ambivalent closeness of the remote in the everyday life of today's youth.

Roland Robertson, who has put this issue on the sociological stage, sees the key moment of globalization as the interpenetration of the global and the local (Robertson, 1995). There exists probably no more obvious symbol for the presence of global in the everyday world than the two golden arches of McDonald's chains that can be found all over this planet. It is phenomena such as these that are first in our mind when we think of globalization; a juggernaut of cultural homogenization that represses the local with its particularities (Ritzer, 2000). In contrast, Robertson emphasises that the global is always created and adapted locally. Someone who orders a BigMac in Bamberg, my home town in Germany, is going to have a different fast food experience than someone ordering the same burger in Bangkok (Watson, 1997). Contrary to the horror scenario of a world made culturally uniform, the local does not simply dissolve in the processes of globalization. But it also does not remain unchanged. Rather, as Robertson states, "contemporary locality is largely produced in something like global terms" (Robertson, 1994, p. 39).

The meaning of this is clearly mirrored in the educational example we are considering. Here too, the local social reality mixes recognizably with images and ideas that are fed from afar. However, this happens in the characteristic pattern noted by Robertson. Off course, the Middle East conflict is not actually playing out in Berlin -its presence in the thoughts of some students is much more symbolic in nature and is therefore characterised by both the situation far away and its local interpretation. This illustrates what Robertson means when he speaks of "globalization": an accelerating interplay between the global and the local in today's world.

The Canadian sociologist Peter Beyer takes this a step further. In his main work, "Religions in Global Society", he issues the tension-filled co-existence of religions in the emerging global society (Beyer, 2006). Beyer's basic thesis states that religions currently operate in a common global frame of reference. They develop, change, and define themselves by making constant reference to each other. In the present global society, the world religions

never meet in their pure form, but always in specific, locally determined constellations: “Both practitioners and external observers understand these religions as unities through variation, in other words, as globalizations. The universals are real abstractions; concrete, socially effective religions appear only as localized particularizations of those global universals. Finally, the construction of both global unity and local manifestations occurs with reference to one another: the religions constitute and reproduce themselves in context of a recognized plurality of religions and subdivisions of religions.” (Beyer, 2007, p. 100).

If we take this notion seriously, any attempt at inter-religious education will have to deal with the question first: education in precisely which “global” constellation?

This makes it clear that the global perspective on religious educations necessitates a localised pedagogical approach. Against this background, the life-world approach of the Neukölln school project would seem to be initially confirmed. However, as the Robert Schreiter points out, we must remember that we are dealing with a theologically challenging “new contextuality” that is different from past forms of such contextuality because it is formed through the tension between the local and the global (Schreiter, 1999). Consequently, the context of inter-religious education can no longer be determined solely by the local social environment of the students. Instead it will become increasingly necessary to differentiate and interpret the interplay between the local and the global in the everyday lives of the students.

However, those in charge of the school project would only receive limited help with this first approach to the complex context of inter-religious education. Until now, the perspective on the changed constellations for such education has largely been confined to external conditions. Consequently, the question of the relationship between the global and the local must now be interwoven with another which extends even deeper into the subject of inter-religious education itself. How are these changes in the life-world of today’s youth affecting their individual constructions of identity and otherness?

The Fluidity of the Other. Inter-Religious Education in the Tension between the Self and the Other.

Inter-religious education explores the tension between oneself and the other. In the conflict situation described above, this tension erupted quite sharply; one part of the multi-religious group of students perceived the distance between self and other as being insurmountable. The gap appears so wide that it not only precludes inter-religious understanding but also the first step to such understanding—the encounter itself.

It is therefore not surprising that the reflection on the other in relationship to oneself in current religious education has been ignited by the challenge of inter-religious education. The debate is rather parallel to the general theological and hermeneutical discussion on alterity. In contrast to the deeply rooted tendencies in theology and education toward exclusion, neutralization and appropriation of the other, the irreducibility of the other is now the premise of interfaith understanding. What Karl Ernst Nipkow calls the “hermeneutics of recalcitrant otherness” (Nipkow, 2005, p. 259), has been re-framed by Theo Sundermeier towards a programmatic “hermeneutics of difference”, which seeks to understand that which is different without appropriating it (Sundermeier, 1996, p. 13).

By enriching the spectrum of religious education approaches to alterity and identity with a cultural perspective on globalization, I question the tacit assumption that generally underlies current models of correlating the self with the other, namely that self and other can be exactly distinguished and therefore be put into relationship to another. According to Christoph Wulf, this initial premise becomes more and more porous because adolescents generally find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between self and other (Wulf, 2006). In his view it is the tendency towards hybridization (cf. Nederveen-Pieterse, 2004) that causes the well-established patterns of inter-cultural education to falter. When cultural phenomena and affiliations get

mingled and mixed due to the interpenetration of the global and the local, the other inevitably loses its distinguishing contours.

How can we imagine this from a religious education perspective? In Protestant religious education, when teens deal with other religious traditions or encounter adherents of other religions in their everyday lives, their interaction with the other is never solely determined by what or who they have standing before them. Because the other already is a part of their selves, mediated by an opaque mixture of prior personal experience, knowledge obtained from various sources, biographical associations, cultural influences, media images, conventional stereotypes etc. As seen in Berlin, this presence is not without tension and it often enough erupts in conflict.

Teachers at the Neukölln School might scoff at this interpretation. In their situation, they would possibly object, concrete suggestions for action were needed-not just options for analysing the situation. However, theoretical perspectives and practical solutions cannot be so easily separated from the other in this case. If self and other actually do penetrate each other, as the concept of hybridization suggests, processes of finding understanding between the self and the other must always be first understood and applied as processes of self-understanding and self-interpretation. These results in a pedagogical indication that can easily be related to the original idea behind the Neukölln school project.

Might it be, one could ask, that it would have been good to enrich contextually based learning with pedagogical approaches that would have given the students the opportunity for self-exploration? For example, they could have explored how the conflict-laden images of Islam in the media shape and perhaps distort their own perception of Islam. As can be seen here, under globalised conditions competences in dealing with religious difference unmistakably takes on a self-reflexive note.

However, in one respect, these thoughts are still rather ungrounded; there is a clear lack of evidence to them. In order to develop a reliable sense of orientation, the superimposed nature of the global, local, and hybrid formation of identity that I have postulated need to be empirically validated.

Teen Rooms as Hybrid Spaces. An Empirical Research Perspective

The interplay between religion, identity and globalization that lies at the heart of this article has hardly been researched empirically. Those who are criticizing this should be aware that the methodological hurdles for such research are particularly high in this case. First, because the formation of identity as discussed above is so individual and complex that it can't really be grasped by quantitative approaches. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is complicated by the fact that youths are often not aware of these processes. Furthermore, initial studies in this direction show that the conventional, language-bound procedures for collecting data are not very suitable to capture the spatial dimension of religious and cultural identities.

A promising research option has recently been brought into play in Switzerland. At the University of Zurich, an ethnographic field study was conducted between 2003 and 2006 that is very helpful for our purposes here (Bonfadelli, Bucher, Hanetseder, Hermann, Ideli & Moser, 2008). This research project sought to identify empirically the role of the media in the identity formation of adolescents with a migration background. In addition to qualitative interviews, visual methods were also used that are of particular interest here. A special focus was directed at the rooms of the youths.

The reason that led the Zurich research team to take this approach is immediately plausible. In hardly any other area of their lives do young people have so much creative freedom as in the space they call their own. As "embodied spaces", teenager's rooms provides very concrete insights into the cultural and religious preferences and the self-understanding of their

occupants (Moser, Hanetseder & Hermann, 2007). Moreover, the everyday aesthetic arrangements of such habitats show in analytically tangible ways how the global and the local flow together within the individual symbolic worlds of contemporary adolescents.

If the photographic images of the Zurich research project (cf. Bonfadelli et al., 2008) are viewed from a religious educational perspective, three aspects stand out that all concur with the theoretical perspective taken in this article.

First, it is clear that the identity constructions of these young migrants have multiple points of reference. The arrangements of their rooms consistently show the co-presence of the global and the local, as described above. Cultural templates are not simply assumed in their entirety; instead, they are intrinsically shaped and combined with bits and pieces from other symbolic repertoires. For example, the trophy won by Yucël at his local football club adorns the same wall as the poster of his favourite Turkish club. Apparently, with relation to his favourite hobby, it is possible for Yucël to position himself in two different cultural spaces. Here the hybridizing dynamics comes to full fruition.

However, these dynamics are by no means limited to the tensions between the majority culture and the culture of origin. Rather, the pictures show the presence of a global youth culture that overlaps both and creates a connection between the two. Most of what can be seen in the photos could be found in any other Swiss teenager's room: a poster of the Olsen twins who were Seda's favourites at the time the photo was taken or a poster of Hong Kong, where Sevinc wants to work someday as a singer. Against this background, the plea to make more use popular media culture as a bridge for processes of inter-religious education gains plausibility (cf. Pirner, 2009).

However, such hybrid spaces are not without their tensions. In the room of Ulas, a 12-year-old Kurdish boy from Turkey, a poster of the exiled Kurdish singer, Şivan Perwer, hangs above the desk while the CD rack is full of international pop music, and the bookshelf is

dominated by the German editions of the Harry Potter books. The simultaneity of different, also conflicting cultural spheres in this photograph points very clearly to the complexity of identity formation today's globalized world.

What place does religion take in such worlds? Although the girls' rooms in particular have numerous religious references, the Zurich project, with its media focus, does not really provide any reliable evidence to answer this question. Based on what has been presented so far, it should be clear that religious education needs to consider such evidence much more; this is particularly, but not exclusively, the case with inter-religious education.

Understanding of Beirut as a Way to Open Doors in Berlin

At the end, I will take you back to Berlin where my article started. The question that naturally arises is whether the communicative blockages were dissolved. In fact, the project managers came to a solution that proves to be particularly well refined against the theoretical background I have devised (Sajak & Muth, 2011, 31f). In order to address the controversial presence of the Middle East conflict, they organised a workshop on this topic.

Interestingly, the workshop was conducted by a Palestinian and an Israelite. This enabled a twofold contextualization of the communicative setting of the inter-religious dialogue. First, the Middle East conflict itself was contextualised with reference to the political deadlock in its region of origin. Second, the students experienced the dialogical potentials of the local constellation in Berlin. In particular, the composition of the team that led the workshop sent an important signal; the conflict in Beirut does not mean inter-religious understanding in Berlin is impossible; on the contrary, it obliges and necessitates such understanding.

As the project continued, it became clear that this pedagogical approach did indeed produce the desired outcome. The previously blocked encounter with the Jewish youths eventually took place and led to a conversation that the participants found enlightening and

positive. What had almost been a failed process of inter-religious education thus ultimately had a happy end. This success cannot be attributed to the perspective I have laid out here, but it can be better understood, as an equally sensitive and consistent response to the changing context of inter-religious education in a globalized world.

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