Introductory Remarks

Interreligious Dialogue in Context

Towards a Systematic Comparison of IRD-Activities in Europe

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Abstract

The article sketches the overall layout of the thematic issue of the 'Journal of Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Societies (JRAT)' on Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) in context. It argues that an analysis of Interreligious Dialogue-activities in their socio-cultural contexts helps to counterbalance the long-standing individualistic bias of IRD-research. First, it presents a systematic description of the present state of the art that distinguishes two strands of IRD-research. Second, it argues for a European comparison, based upon the most recent findings from the 'SMRE – Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe'. The article closes with references to the structure of the present volume of JRaT to facilitate such a comparison.

Keywords

interreligious dialogue – religious studies – Europe – comparison

1 A Surprising Research-Bias

Throughout the last two decades, interreligious dialogue (IRD) has developed into an increasingly significant dimension of present-day societies. On the one side, there are the activities of what has frequently been described as the 'IRD-Movement'.¹ Researchers such as Anna Halafoff and John Fahy/Jan Bock have identified several individuals, networks and organizations that put the furtherance of interreligious dialogue as a means of religious cooperation into the centre of their activities.

On the other side, the notion of interreligious dialogue has entered into multi-fold socio-cultural discourses. The idea of IRD has, for example, been integrated into official policy documents of the United Nations Organization (UN) as well as the European Union (EU) and other international bodies.² In this respect, dialogue has gained significance way beyond traditional IRD-circles.

This emerging significance of IRD has triggered diverse academic publications from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Early on, IRD has become a growing field of debate in Theology and Education, but also in Peace Studies and International Relations.³ This research has produced a highly differentiated and fascinating body of literature. In addition, the last years have also seen the emergence of related publications on concepts such as 'interreligious competence', 'interreligious care' or even 'interreligious studies' that expand the debates on IRD even further.⁴

As will be argued in more detail in the next section, most of this literature, however, uses a surprisingly biased concept of dialogue: First, it approaches IRD primarily as an individual endeavour. The majority of present-day research models the notion of dialogue along the lines of hermeneutic processes of individual learning and understanding. Second, researchers tend to use these individualized concepts of IRD as a basis for transnational or transregional generalizations. They discuss the structures as well as the impact of IRD-activities, without systematic references to differences in various socio-cultural contexts.

1 Fahy/Bock, *The Interfaith Movement*; Halafoff, *The Multifaith Movement*; Rötting/Sinn/Inan, *Praxisbuch interreligiöser Dialog*; Boehle, *Inter-Religious Co-operation*.

2 Lehmann, *Religiously Affiliated NGOs*; Lehmann, *Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) in International Politics*; Banchoff, *Interreligious Dialogue and International Relations*.

3 Krobath/Lindner/Oetschnigg, *Nun sag, wie hast du's mit der religiösen Vielfalt?*; Müller/Schmidt/Schüler, *Religion im Dialog*.

4 Snodgrass, *Navigating religious difference in spiritual care and competence*; Merkt/Schlipf/Schweitzer/Biesinger, *Ethische und interreligiöse Kompetenzen in der Pflege*; Cornille/Conway, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*; Leirvic, *Interreligious Studies*.

On the contrary, the present issue of the 'Journal of Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Societies (JRAT)'⁵ wants to propose a further dimension of IRD-research. The articles brought together in this volume are embedded into a strand of analysis that argues precisely for the systematic contextualization of IRD. They invite their readers to think of dialogue as a socio-cultural phenomenon that helps to better understand the role of religion in present-day societies. To do so, the following articles take a comparative perspective on the history of IRD in selected European countries.

To better understand this particular perspective, it is at first necessary to locate the analysis of IRD 'in context' within the present state of the art of IRD-research (1). On this basis, the following considerations will present a systematic rationale to compare IRD-activities in Europe (2). The article closes with references to the structure of the present volume of JRAT to further facilitate such a comparison (3).

2 Two Poles of Present-Day Research on IRD

Research on IRD has reached a point that has seen the publication of a first set of textbooks and edited volumes.⁶ This state of the art makes it possible to identify two poles of present-day research: (a) research focusing on IRD as individual encounters, and (b) research focusing on IRD-activities in their socio-cultural contexts. An ideal-type juxtaposition of these poles will help to clarify the approach put forward by the present issue of JRAT.

2.1 *Research Focusing on IRD as Individual Encounters*

The first of these two poles certainly is the more established one. It already looks back on several decades of research and is dominated by theologians as well as different types of IRD-practitioners. The conceptual basis of this pole can be exemplified with references to a frequently cited article by Marianne Moyaert – published in the 2013-compendium 'Understanding Interreligious Relations'. In this article, Moyaert argues that:

⁵ Lehmann, *Interreligious Dialogue in Context*.

⁶ Weisse/Amirpur/Körs/Vieregge, *Religions and Dialogue*; Cornille, *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*; Fu/Spiegler, *Religious Issues and Interreligious Relations*; Forward, *A Short Introduction to Inter-Religious Dialogue*; Meißner/Affolderbach/Mohagegi/Renz, *Handbuch christlich-islamischer Dialog*.

Dialogue is connected deep down with the search for truth and a striving for wisdom. It excludes fanaticism. A fanatic is a person who, convinced that he is absolutely right, locks himself up in his own position and refuses any critical testing or challenge. Dialogue presupposes precisely the engagement of people with critical minds, who question the obvious and also allow others to challenge them.⁷

This quote provides a good example for the individualized concept of IRD that stands at the center of the first pole of research. Moyaert presents dialogue first of all as a specific type of learning process (a 'search for truth'). She conceptualizes IRD as the basis of a critical attitude that is open for challenges and should form the foundation of individual encounters ('engagement of people with a critical mind'). All these categories describe IRD as an individual state of mind that is opposed to fanaticism.

And this type of methodological individualism can be found in three entwined strands of publications on IRD: First, researchers closer to the first pole have highlighted the complexity of IRD-activities. Authors such as Jean-Claude Basset and Paul Hedges underline that dialogue is such a complex process that one has to distinguish several dimensions of it so that dialogue can be applied efficiently.⁸ One of the most influential of these typologies was introduced by the 1991-document 'Dialogue and Proclamation' published by the 'Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue' and the 'Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples'. This document distinguishes four classic dimensions of individual IRD-activities – a dialogue of life, a dialogue of action, a dialogue of theological exchange and a dialogue of religious experience.⁹

Second, dialogue-researchers influenced by the first pole have produced multiple biographies of individuals committed to dialogue¹⁰ and manuals for the practical implementation of IRD-activities.¹¹ This strand of IRD-research focuses on the questions of why IRD has been undertaken and how dialogue can be put into practice. It has been instrumental in providing motivational

7 Moyaert, *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 206.

8 Basset, *Le Dialogue Interreligieux*, pp. 239–406; Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*. Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement*; Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*.

9 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue/Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: *Dialogue and Proclamation*.

10 Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*; Latinovic/Mannion/Phan, *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue*; Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*.

11 Druel, *Je crois en Dieu! – Moïse non Plus*; Garred/Abu-Nimer, *Making Peace with Faith*; Koch/Tillessen/Wilkens, *Religionskompetenz*; Schmid/Hamdan, *Junge Muslime als Partner*.

literature as well as examples for promising practices to put IRD into action. Along those lines, this second strand of the present debate has exerted a particular influence outside academic contexts.

Finally, the first pole of research is also documented in publications on the developments of dialogue-activities in different national contexts – from short essays on the present-day situation to detailed analyses with significant historical depth.¹² Until most recently, these publications were, however, primarily limited to the description of IRD-activities in their respective countries or regions. There are only very first attempts to systematically take the interdependencies between IRD-activities and their socio-cultural contexts into account or to deal with the specific structures of IRD-activities in different socio-cultural contexts.¹³ This is exactly the point where the second pole comes in.

2.2 *Research Focussing on IRD-Activities in their Socio-Cultural Contexts*

The research of the second pole is much more recent, and has so far primarily been undertaken by Sociologists and Scholars of Religion. As distinguished from the research closer to the first pole, its protagonists tend to start from a rather descriptive, heuristic concept of IRD:¹⁴ Recently, the editors of a 2018-special issue of *Social Compass* have, for example, brought together a variety of articles on 'Interreligious Relations and Governance of Religion in Europe'. They conceptualize IRD as a specific set of discourses and organized activities:

The case studies included share an understanding of the multifaceted nature of the interreligious movement and its internal diversity and complexity. This is reflected in a variety of terms used to denote the semantic field of the phenomenon, such as interreligious, interfaith, multifait and interconvictional.¹⁵

This concept of IRD is also underlining the complexity of IRD activities (its 'multifaceted nature'). In this respect, it is very close to the research dominated by the first pole. In addition, the concept from 'Social Compass' is, however,

12 Iwuchukwu, *Muslim-Christian Dialogue*; Aguilar, *Interreligious Dialogue and the Partition of India*; Sinn, *Religiöser Pluralismus im Werden*; Könnemann/Vischer, *Interreligiöser Dialog in der Schweiz*.

13 Merdjanova/Brodeur, *Religion as a Conversation Starter*.

14 These are documented in an increasing amount of 'grey literature' as well as conferences. To give a most recent example: Conference 'Interreligious Dialogue in the Post-Secular Age'.

15 Grier/Nagel, *Interreligious Relations*, p. 304.

less normative than the one presented with reference to Moyaert and targets a different level of IRD-activities. Focusing upon a 'variety of terms used to denote the semantic field of the phenomenon', Griera/Nagel move the emphasis away from an understanding of dialogue as a practice of individual hermeneutics. They rather approach IRD as a social phenomenon within differentiated, pluralized (post- or late-) modern societies.¹⁶

This is precisely what the short-hand 'in context' stands for in the present volume. By analyzing IRD-activities as socio-cultural phenomena, the second strand of IRD-research proposes a shift in the analytic take on dialogue. And such a shift adds two further dimensions to present-day research:

On the one hand, the research that is closer to the second pole has been very strong in putting particular emphasis on IRD-activities in local contexts.¹⁷ On the basis of participant observations and in-depth interviews, the respective analyses *inter alia* invite their readers to have a closer look at processes of inclusion and exclusion within dialogue-circles, to raise the question of formal infrastructures and to analyze the multiple forms of IRD-discourses.¹⁸ In this sense, they contribute a more critical dimension to the already existing literature on the developments of dialogue in different national contexts.

On the other hand, the publications informed by the second pole tend to focus on the interrelations between IRD-activities and specific sub-systems or sub-fields of society. The work of Wendy Cadge/Mar Griera/Kirsten Lucken and Ines Michalowski, for example, stands for a variety of more recent publications on the relationship between IRD and politics.¹⁹ Along similar lines, scholars such as Melanie Priedeaux and Lise Galal ask researchers to highlight the complex networks that constitute dialogue-activities and focus upon their relationship to the socio-cultural context – including economics, arts, medicine etc.²⁰

Along these lines, the present issue of JRAT wants to expand the work around the second pole by pursuing a systematic comparison of IRD-activities in Europe.

16 Giordan/Lynch, *Interreligious Dialogue*; Lehmann/Koch, *Perspectives from Sociology*; Schmid/Almila Akca/Barwig, *Gesellschaft gemeinsam gestalten*.

17 Ippgrave/Knauth/Körs/Vieregge/Lippe, *Religion and Dialogue in the City*; Nordin, *Secularization, Religious Plurality and Position*; Dussert-Galiant, *Le Dialogue Interreligieux*.

18 Klinkhammer/Frese/Satilmis/Seibert, *Interreligiöser und interkultureller Dialog*; Lamine, *La Cohabitation des Dieux*.

19 Cadge/Griera/Lucken/Michalowski, *Religion in Public Institutions*; Nagel, *Religious Pluralization and Interfaith Activism*; Griera, *Public Policies*.

20 Priedeaux, *Understanding Neighbourhoods as Multifaith Spaces*; Galal, *Making Space for Faith*. Christensen/Høeg/Kühle/Nordin, *Rooms of Silence*.

3 Towards Systematic European Comparison

It has frequently been argued that comparison is one of the core tools of any type of analytic endeavour. The Academic Study of Religion, for example, looks back upon a long history of comparative analyses that underline the potentials as well as the dangers of comparison.²¹ And the same can be said with regards to other disciplines (such as Political Sciences and History) or further interdisciplinary endeavours that have also systematically considered the pros and cons of comparative approaches to research.²²

In all these cases, the literature underlines the necessity to reflect at first upon the implicit assumptions of a comparative venture. In the present volume, the comparisons are based upon the most recent findings of the 'SMRE – Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe'. So, we have to discuss the implications of this particular tool of comparative research.

3.1 *The Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe (SMRE)*

The SMRE is jointly organized and managed by Antonius Liedhegener and Anastas Odermatt. According to its website, it:

was established to substantially improve the data situation of religious affiliation in Europe and to provide more reliable data for further research and debate. In the first phase (2011–2014) data from a wide range of sources have been collected by the SMRE-team. The second phase of the project (2015–2018) was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The SMRE now provides detailed statistics and consolidated estimates on religious affiliation for European countries and regions including the EU.²³

Along those lines, the SMRE starts from a concept of religion that is based upon affiliation as institutional membership. This clearly links the SMRE to a specific strand of research on religion. And its authors are actually very clear about the limitations of such an approach:

21 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*; Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges*; Patton/Ray, *A Magic still Dwells*.

22 Freitag, *Methoden des Vergleichs*; Felski/Friedman, *Comparison*.

23 <https://www.smre-data.ch>, for the first phase: Liedhegener/Odermatt, *Religious Affiliation in Europe*.

To be sure, data on religious affiliation are certainly not the only statistical indicator for religion, religiosity or religious vitality (for the recent trends in measuring religion see Brenner 2016; Finke and Bader 2017; Huber and Huber 2012; Pollack and Rosta 2015, 48–85). However, data on religious affiliation are certainly an indispensable baseline when it comes to measuring religion and religious diversity. Statistics on religious affiliation are the most basic information on religion on the individual, organisational and societal level.²⁴

The fascinating thing about the SMRE is the fact that this database brings together reliable data on religious affiliation from nation states all over Europe. In this way, it provides a strong basis for a classification of the religious situations in Europe.

3.2 *Classification of the Religious Situations in Europe*

In one of the most recent SMRE-Working Papers, Liedhegener/Odermatt actually suggest a two-dimensional classification of the religious situation in European countries: First, they underline that European nation states are dominated by a rather limited set of what they call 'largest religions': Catholic, Muslim, Non-affiliated, Orthodox, and Protestant. Second, they distinguish three degrees of religious pluralization: dominant (the largest religion takes a share of 60% or more), fragmented (the largest religion takes a share of 35% or less), and pluralized (the largest group takes a share in between 36% and 59%).²⁵

For the purpose of the present volume, this classification is of particular interest in so far as it provides a solid basis for European comparison. In addition, it also relates directly to two prominent debates of IRD-research:

The idea of 'religious pluralization' has always been central to the analyses of IRD. Authors such as Diane Eck and Catherine Cornille see IRD primarily as a consequence of processes of religious pluralization, and argue that plural societies need interreligious dialogue.²⁶ In his last publications, Peter L. Berger added an interesting twist to these debates by proposing the idea of two-fold pluralization.²⁷ With this concept, he argues that the confrontation with a sec-

24 Liedhegener/Odermatt, *Religious Affiliation as a Baseline for Religious Diversity in Contemporary Europe*, p. 6.

25 Liedhegener/Odermatt, *Religious Affiliation as a Baseline for Religious Diversity in Contemporary Europe*, pp. 31–37.

26 Eck, *A New Religious America*; Cornille/Corigliano, *Interreligious Dialogue and Cultural Change*.

27 Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*; Pfadenhauer, *The New Sociology of Knowledge*.

ular mind-set has to be systematically integrated into the analysis of religiously plural contexts.²⁸

The category 'largest religions' links the analyses to the wider discussions around the cultural significance of religion that has most prominently been discussed with regards to the ambivalent concept of 'civilizations' introduced by Samuel Huntington.²⁹ It suggests that specific spatial entities – the SMRE focuses on 'nation states' and Huntington on 'civilizations' – are influenced by specific religious traditions. In a more cautious way, José Casanova and the late David Martin have been among those authors who further substantiate such a type of influence on social developments.³⁰ They propose that religion has to be interpreted as one of the aspects that – among others – have shaped the developments of societies in Europe and North America. And later on, these two modern classics have expanded their argument to South America and Asia.³¹

With regards to the following reflections, these references to the SMRE ask us to direct our attention in two seemingly opposing directions: On the one hand, they suggest that a comparison of IRD-activities within Europe has to check to what extent 'religious traditions' and 'religious pluralization' help to better understand these activities. On the other hand, the references to the SMRE also underline that the upcoming analyses have to be open for the possibility that European comparisons might also have to take further analytical perspectives into consideration.³² We have to be prepared to look out for variables other than 'religious traditions' and 'religious pluralization' to understand IRD-activities.

Accordingly, the present volume is structured in a way that is open towards both of these two directions in order to analyze the processes that constitute IRD-activities within their socio-cultural contexts.

28 Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

29 Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

30 Martin, *On Secularization – Towards a Revised General Theory*; Martin/Catto, *The Religious and the Secular*; Casanova, *Westliche christliche Säkularisierung und Globalisierung*; Casanova, *From Modernization to Secularization to Globalization*.

31 Martin, *Tongues of Fire*; Casanova, *Asian Catholicism*; Casanova, *Parallel Reformations in Latin America*.

32 Zander, *'Europäische' Religionsgeschichte*; Gladigow, *Europäische Religionsgeschichte*; Casanova, *Europas Angst vor der Religion*; Rémon, *Religion und Gesellschaft in Europa*.

4 European Comparison of IRD-Activities

To put this research-agenda into practice, the present issue of JRAT is divided into three major sections. The first two articles (i.e. articles 2 and 3) highlight specific disciplinary perspectives on IRD. They invite their readers to further reflect upon the different poles of present-day IRD-research and the influence of these poles on specific case analyses:

- IRD from the point of view of Pedagogy (Ruth Vilà/Assumpta Aneas/Montse Freixa)³³
- IRD from the point of view of Theology (Regina Polak)³⁴

Section two (i.e. articles 4 to 13) provides historic case analyses on IRD-activities in different European national contexts. Following the SMRE-classification, these articles bring together contributions dealing with the more recent history of IRD-activities in ten countries:

- Catholic-Pluralized: Switzerland (Hansjörg Schmid)³⁵
- Catholic-Dominant: Spain (Maria del Mar Griera)³⁶
- Muslim-Pluralized: Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ahmet Alibašić)³⁷
- Muslim-Dominant: Turkey (Zişan Furat/Hamit Er)³⁸
- Orthodox-Pluralized: North Macedonia (Gjoko Gjorgievski)³⁹
- Orthodox-Dominant: Serbia (Angela Ilić)⁴⁰
- Protestant-Pluralized: Sweden (Magdalena Nordin)⁴¹
- Protestant-Dominant: Denmark (Lise Galal)⁴²
- No Religious Affiliation-Pluralized: United Kingdom (Melanie Prideaux)⁴³
- No Religious Affiliation-Dominant: Germany/East (Anna Körs/Karsten Lehmann)⁴⁴

Within this analytic framework, the analyses have been selected to bring together cases of particular proximity as well as distance.⁴⁵ The following articles cover three cases from the Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia

33 Vilà/Freixa/Aneas, *Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Education*.

34 Polak, *Between Theological Ideals and Empirical Realities*.

35 Schmid, *Interreligious Dialogues in Switzerland*.

36 Griera, *The Many Shapes of Interreligious Relations*.

37 Alibašić, *History of Inter-Religious Dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

38 Furat/Er, *From Dialogue to Living Together*.

39 Gjorgievski, *Nurturing the Culture of Dialogue – Macedonian Experience*.

40 Ilić, *Looking Through a Veil*.

41 Nordin, *How to Understand Interreligious Dialogue in Sweden*.

42 Galal, *Between Representation and Subjectivity*.

43 Prideaux, *Legitimising Religion in Public*.

44 Körs/Lehmann, *Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) Activities in East Germany*.

45 Ragin/Becker, *What is a Case?*; Glaser/Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

and Serbia) as well as two cases from Scandinavia (Sweden and Denmark). They also include three cases that are – geographically speaking – at the edges of Europe (Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom) as well as two cases situated in the centre of Europe (Switzerland and Germany/East).

This specific sample helps to move the analyses away from the initial SMRE-classification and to open up a space for further comparative considerations. Its analytic potential has been further substantiated by the fact that all analyses follow a qualitative approach to research – covering diverse methods of data-gathering (such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, document analyses etc.) as well as data-analysis (such as grounded theory, historic analysis etc.). This helps to put particular emphasis on the embeddedness of IRD-activities within their multi-fold socio-cultural contexts. And this, in turn, increases the heuristic potential of the case analyses.

Taken together, the national case analyses form the basis for the contributions published in the third section of the present volume (i.e. articles 14 to 16). These final articles highlight two systematic perspectives on the analysis of IRD in Europe that can be drawn from the previous reflections as well as tentative suggestions on the potential of IRD-research for the analysis of religions in Europe:

- IRD as a phenomenon of secularization (Karsten Lehmann)⁴⁶
- IRD as a phenomenon of cosmopolitan governance (Anne Koch)⁴⁷
- Preliminary comments on the potentials of IRD-research (Karsten Lehmann)⁴⁸

In this sense, all the authors of the present JRAT volume hope to add new empirical and systematic stimuli to the study of interreligious dialogue within the context of present-day European societies.

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46 Lehmann, *Interreligious Dialogue – a Response to Processes of Secularization*.

47 Koch, *Cosmopolitan Modes of Governance of Religious Diversity Across Europe*.

48 Lehmann, *Dynamic IRD-Activities in Europe*.

Focus 'Interreligiosity' (SIR) of the University College of Teacher Education, Vienna/Krems. In addition, the IRD-Con Conference was sponsored by the Association of Roman Catholic Orders and the Protestant Church in Austria, as well as the Erste Bank. Throughout this text, references are made to country-specific examples discussed in other articles from this issue of JRaT. The editor of the present issue wants to thank all of you who have made this possible.

Biography

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