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Identifying the Field of Research

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It is certainly both appropriate and necessary to give an overview of interreligious studies and to discuss the achievements in this field of research.[1] However, the present article does not give this overview. Rather, it reflects on some issues relevant to interreligious studies as a field of research, based on experiences and results from an international research project (ReDi),[2] which combined theological and empirical studies, though mainly separate from—but also in discussion with—each other.[3] The constant deliberations that arose between researchers of theology, religious studies, religious education, and social sciences, all with common interest in the practice and theory of dialogue and interreligious relations, proved to be challenging. At the same time, they served as stimuli to investigate the issues at stake on a meta level. Terms like "dialogue," "religion," "worldview," "normative," and "descriptive" were often on the agenda in addition to issues related to the object of study and the research questions.

This chapter does not focus on the entire scope of the ReDi project; rather it focuses on the empirical study of dialogue between religions and worldviews, both in urban settings more generally and in education (particularly religious education). There is no doubt about the existence of interreligious studies as a new area of academic study, with the establishment of recent study programs, research projects, conferences, and journals.[4] The issue on the table here is whether it can be justified as a field of research in its own right.

For ReDi, "interreligious studies" was not the key phrase from the start; rather, "dialogue" was. At an early stage, our research staff meetings revealed that several of the empirical researchers had more trouble with the term "dialogue" than did the theological researchers. The empirical researchers tended to use "interreligious" rather than "dialogue" because "interreligious" was perceived to be more descriptive, while "dialogue" was seen as more normative. On the other hand, in the empirical field, this dynamic could be turned upside-down. For instance, the actors studied were often talking about "dialogue." Perhaps more importantly, "dialogue" also covered the participation of nonreligious worldviews in the interactions being empirically investigated, while "interreligious" functioned more exclusively.[5] Still, the actors shared a somewhat normative understanding of "dialogue." They did not consider all kinds of activities that included people with different religious or world views to be "dialogue" proper. Some activities were deemed only "cooperation." Such terminological issues mirror the emic/etic differentiation in qualitative empirical research, moving from more experience-near to more experience-distant concepts as part of the analysis. One example of a movement from experience-near to more analytical concepts is the continuum the project found between the more practical "side-by-side dialogue" activities and the more verbal "face-to-face dialogue" activities.[6]

Irrespective of the results coming from individual empirical studies of "interreligious relations" or "dialogue activities between religious and world views," projects like ReDi do not necessarily justify the existence of a distinct field of research. It merely shows there are activities that can be studied as part of the study of religion. In order to speak about interreligious studies as a field of research in its own right, something more is needed. In humanities and social studies, where theory often plays a significant role in defining and constructing both the object of study and the approach to this object, ideas about the field of research as something distinct is not always cherished. Something can be learned from the philosophy of knowledge in natural sciences without adopting their understanding of all the terms used. For instance, the following definition of a "field of research" can be adopted:

> an area of science consisting of the following elements: a central problem, a domain consisting of items taken to be facts related to that problem, general explanatory factors and goals providing expectations as to how the problem is to be solved, techniques and methods, and, sometimes,

> but not always, concepts, laws and theories which are related to the problem and which attempt to realize the explanatory goals.[7]

In ReDi, one common problem we identified was, "What are the possibilities and limitations of dialogue between religions and worldviews?" We also distinguished between (a) a domain consisting of actors in dialogue, (b) content of dialogue, (c) methods of dialogue, and (d) spatial and material aspects of dialogue. In terms of explanatory factors, the project employed the term "social capital," which investigated whether "dialogue" contributed to participants acquiring such capital or if "dialogue" was dependent on the existence of "social capital" among the participants. This proved to be a fruitful approach,[8] possibly suggesting that the existence of "social capital" is more of a resource that enables interreligious dialogue rather than an effect of it. The discussion of social capital raises a broader question about "context." How does the research distinguish between the object of study (here: dialogue) and its "surroundings" (context), and how is the relationship between the two conceptualized? In ReDi, we presented "dialogue" as something distinct that could be studied in different contexts in order to understand it better, hence the empirical studies carried out in London, Hamburg, Duisburg-Essen, Oslo, and Stockholm. However, this research strategy depends on whether "dialogue" in all these places is the same. In fact, there is no clear difference between object of study and context. Dialogue, as the object of study, is not already distinct from its context. Rather dialogue is "separated out" by the researcher from the context and thereby established as an object of study. As such, a relationship between the object of study and its context is established.

In order to "separate dialogue out" from its context, the defining characteristics of "dialogue" become central. The definition of dialogue for ReDi was loose and practice-oriented. It more or less overlapped with interreligious (and inter-worldview) relations because we wanted to cover a range of practices. In most of them, "dialogue" was a commonly used word. In this way, a discursive, pragmatic, or functional definition was used, emphasizing the fact that people with differing religious and/or worldview backgrounds met and deliberately acted together across lines of division. However, the definition was not substantial. Certain characteristics had to be in place in order to qualify an activity or encounter as "dialogue" or "interreligious" in terms of content. Paul Hedges, for example, proposes one such definition: "Interreligious studies concerns studies of at least two religions (but it also includes non-religions or secular worldviews) and the dynamic encounter or relationship this entails." He adds that it should also be "a dynamic lived reality," "interdisciplinary," and "often engaged in activism"; recognize "the researcher as actor"; and push "hegemonic boundaries in disciplines and

religious traditions."[9] The two approaches to the relationship between object of study and its context, referred to above, are two different ways of contextualizing the research object. While one is practice-oriented, the other is content-oriented.

In the qualitative empirical studies of the ReDi project, although we mainly drew on the practice-oriented approach to the relationship between research object and context, we observed that the structure of the context in which dialogue activities took place could be differently framed. We differentiated between the urban and the educational setting. In the urban, frames were relatively loose, even if structural, spatial, and social restrictions could be observed. These were particularly visible through the political support and public funding of dialogue activities. This was happening in all settings, but it was generally limited by conditions put on this funding by the local authorities regarding form and content of dialogue. On the other hand, actors needed to be aware of the way the calls for funding were formulated. In educational settings, dialogue was staged and directed by the teacher and was sometimes even supported and assessed by public servants through curricula. In other words, dialogue in educational settings tended to be much more strict, structured, and formally framed. Interestingly enough, the walls between the educational and urban settings were discovered to be, to some extent, porous and in several cases nonexistent. Dialogue practitioners who belonged to the civil sector were often eager to gain access to schools in order to stimulate and support dialogue between religions and worldviews.

Recognizing the differences in the framing of contexts in which interreligious activities are carried out, and the distance between a practice-oriented and a content-oriented approach to the object of research (dialogue / the interreligious), underlines the complexities related to establishing interreligious studies as a field of research in its own right. It also suggests that the relationship between the research object and its social and cultural context plays a key role, and is perhaps one of the main problems this research seeks to understand and explain.

Notes

1 This chapter draws on my earlier article, which discusses empirical studies that can be understood as part of a field of research; see Geir Skeie, "Dialogue between and among Religions and Worldviews as a Field of Research," in Ipgrave et al., *Religion and Dialogue in the City: Case Studies on Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education*, Religious Diversity and Education in Europe 36 (Münster: Waxmann, 2018), 301–16. It should be noted that in the countries involved in this research, religious education refers to teaching and learning about religions and worldviews in a distinct school subject and as part of public education. In the case of Germany, the religious education is provided through a partnership between the state and religious communities.

2 ReDi, or "Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies," is an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative research project, completed in 2018, which focused on the possibilities and limitations of interreligious dialogue in Hamburg, Duisburg-Essen, London, Oslo, and Stockholm. The project sought to understand the complex phenomenon of interreligious dialogue, with special attention to its potential to aid social processes of integration

and peace education. It also aimed at contributing to productively shaping those processes. The project integrated the fields of theology, social sciences, and education in a study of the possibilities and limitations of interreligious dialogue at a theological and empirical level. See https://www.awr.uni-hamburg.de/forschung/beendete-forschungsprojekte/redi-projekt.html, accessed January 6, 2020.

3 Katajun Amirpur, Thorsten Knauth, Carola Roloff, and Wolfram Weisse, eds., *Perspektiven dialogischer Theologie: Offenheit in den Religionen und eine Hermeneutik des interreligiösen Dialogs*, vol. 10 (Münster: Waxmann, 2016); Ipgrave et al., *Religion and Dialogue in the City*; Wolfram Weisse, Katajun Amirpur, Anna Körs, and Dörthe Vieregge, eds., *Religions and Dialogue: International Approaches*, vol. 7 (Münster: Waxmann, 2014). This project still produced publications in 2019.

4 See Hans Gustafson, "Interreligious and Interfaith Studies in Relation to Religious Studies and Theological Studies," *StateofFormation.org*, January 6, 2015.

5 Here, the key role of the Humanist Association in bringing about dialogue between religions and worldviews in Norway is illustrative. See Dag Husebø and Øystein Lund Johannessen, "Interreligious Dialogue in Oslo in the Years following the Terror Attacks of 22 July 2011," in Ipgrave et al., *Religion and Dialogue in the City*, 115–40.

6 Julia Ipgrave and Marie von der Lippe, "Interreligious Dialogue and Engagement in the City," in Ipgrave et al., *Religion and Dialogue in the City*, 277–90.

7 Lindley Darden and Nancy Maull, "Interfield Theories," *Philosophy of Science* 44, no. 1 (1977): 44.

8 A topic of a forthcoming publication.

9 Paul Hedges, "Editorial Introduction: Interreligious Studies," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (2014): 127–31.

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