Learning in interreligious Contexts: An empirical Analysis of Scriptural Reasoning and the Development of interreligious Learning Competencies

Dissertation Proposal
Alexandra Morath
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Supervisors: Assoc.-Prof. Dr. Martin Rötting (PLUS), Prof. Dr. Regina Polak (Uni Vienna)

1. Research Questions and Objectives

This dissertation investigates the development of interreligious learning competencies among participants and moderators of Scriptural Reasoning processes (SR), a practical interreligious dialogue method that brings representatives of different religious, spiritual, and worldview traditions together for thematic exchange over selected excerpts from (sacred) texts (Ford 2013; Ochs 2019). Despite research examining SR under various frameworks (Kepnes 2006; Ford 2006; Cheetham 2013; Vaughan 2015; Weiss 2017; Moseley 2018; Welling 2020; Roebben 2022; Pope 2023), empirical analysis of competency development and influencing factors remain limited.

Given increasing societal polarization, research into dialogical methods like SR that promote active listening, empathy, and mutual understanding is especially relevant. A three-step methodology will provide reflected access to SR as scientifically analyzed practice examples — field research, interviews with moderators, and particularly with participants

A standardized factor list (3.1) defines relevant influences on SR processes and will be completed for each process. SR processes will be conducted with four interreligious groups in the DACH region (3.1). Field research observations will be recorded in a research diary. Subsequently, moderators and participants will be interviewed using the "learning spiral" framework (3.2), developed from preliminary considerations and prior SR workshop observations. Interview focus lies on multi-perspective reflection of the SR process and assessment of individually perceived development of interreligious learning competencies. Responses will be coded and evaluated using qualitative content analysis based on Philipp Mayring (2015) in MAXQDA software. All findings from interviews and field research will be comparatively analyzed with the factor list to identify patterns between factors and learning outcomes.

Research Questions:

1. Which interreligious learning competencies develop among SR participants?

2. What influence do SR process factors have on participants regarding learnable interreligious learning competencies?

3. Which SR process factors are decisive for forming interreligious learning competencies?

2. Research Context and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Scriptural Reasoning: Origins and Development

SR originated in Jewish learning traditions, developed since 1992 by Jewish theologian Peter Ochs and Anglican theologian David F. Ford through "Textual Reasoning", initially applied within Jewish-Christian dialogue, later expanded to include Muslim participants (Ford 2013:183) and in the 2000s also participants from non-Abrahamic faiths. The practice initially occurred within theological faculties, emphasizing regularity and repetition. Participants met regularly at conferences to discuss diverse themes and texts, continuously deepening knowledge and mutual understanding while questioning their own religious perspectives (Ford 2013:159).

SR procedures developed collaboratively over years. Texts are individually presented, explored, and discussed. Groups concluded with brief synthesis of different thematic threads and insights. The founding group practiced SR for years within a close circle before bringing the method to a broader public (Ford 2013:149). Communication rules for SR were developed, defined, and published in the early 2000s (Ford 2013:152f.). Today SR is practiced worldwide as an interreligious dialogue method by groups in various organizational forms. The Society for Scriptural Reasoning publishes current research in the Journal of Scriptural Reasoning. However, current online research for the DACH region reveals declining SR offerings compared to ten years ago [2], warranting deeper investigation within this research.

2.2 Critical Perspectives and Open Questions

Critics claim SR practitioners' desire for harmony between religions relativizes boundaries and differences, therefore treating only simple themes while avoiding confrontational topics (Kavka 2007; Lindner 2007; Wilmot 2009). Advocates counter that under respectful conditions - following SR rules - the method serves especially well for addressing difficult themes (Ochs 2019), requiring acquisition, practice, and consolidation of (interreligious) communication competencies.

SR orientations (hermeneutical, exegetical, academic, practice-oriented) depend primarily on diverse groups and organizations adopting the method. Despite openness, the method faces challenges: Must participants belong to specific religions? Can religious boundary-crossers or undecided individuals be included? Can SR be practiced with non-religious people? How do these questions influence text selection? Which texts are sacred and why (Torah/Tanakh, Quran/Hadith, Old/New Testament)? How are religions without "sacred" texts integrated? Who decides text selection and combinations (laypeople/theologians)? Current questions include AI program utilization for text selection and participants' self-understanding regarding their own religiousness and interpretation for daily life.

2.3 Interreligious Learning: Encounter, Perspective-Shifting, and Reflection

For Stephan Leimgruber (2002), encounter between people of different religions and cultures provides the learning process foundation. In SR this encounter manifests uniquely, as exchange

over religious texts aims toward participants' experiences and deep personal levels (Avci 2018:4f.). SR emphasizes perception and handling of one's own religious interpretation by those of other faiths. Katja Böhme (2023) underscores multi-layered reflection importance, viewing ambiguity tolerance as a learning goal.

School contexts particularly demonstrate interreligious encounter and shared learning importance, where students of all religions, nationalities, cultures, and worldviews converge (Schlüter 2005:556). Research in educational settings thus serves as a model for adult education interreligious learning research. Respectful engagement with religious diversity highlights SR's peace-promoting and conflict-preventative potential (Schweitzer 2003; Ochs 2019).

Interreligious dialogue requires self-reflection regarding one's own faith/religion/spirituality while remaining open to others' perspectives (Moyaert 2011:236; Cheetham 2013:299-312). SR rules explicitly instruct active listening and recognizing/overcoming prejudices. "Interreligious competency" comprises attitudinal competency, knowledge competency, action competency, and dialogue competency (Höbsch 2023:2f.), emerging from independent analysis ability of religious statements in plural contexts and developing differentiated argumentation (Höbsch 2023:3).

2.4 Religious Studies: Between Observation and Participation

Religious studies serve as reflection site for interreligious contexts while transcending "passive" observation. The analytical "watchtower" perspective importance (Koch 2007) remains undisputed, as interreligious dialogue processes don't function well *a priori* or deliver helpful results automatically (Koch/Lehmann 2024:18). Power, gender, politics brings questions to be asked. Event reasons/backgrounds/locations, dynamics and boundaries between confessions/religions require clarification for appropriate positioning in overall societal discourse (Klinkhammer 2019:96-101).

Rötting and other applied religious studies representatives dispute purely "passive" approaches, arguing "religious people are capable of cultural-scientific reflection on their religiosity" (Rötting 2024:34). Empirical field investigations enable particularly intensive reflection practice (Rötting 2024:34), allowing field reflection from inside and outside. Non-religious researchers understand field participants' interests and intentions differently without religious connection (Rötting 2024:34). Simultaneously, "continuous theory-field reciprocity" (Rötting 2024:42) ensures maximum objectivity.

## 2.5 "Scriptural Reasoning with DialogueImpulse": A Multi-Stage Reflection Process

Between 2019-2025 I extended SR by two reflection stages, aiming to compose a shared text - a "dialogueimpulse" - for multireligious celebrations. This SR variant's decisive features are multi-stage reflection processes and a "result" that is discussed, processed and jointly decided on to be read as an "interreligious sermon". Beyond initial diverse text discussion (SR), a further group conversation follows a period of self-reflection. Texts are discussed simultaneously with particular focus on perceiving different (religious/spiritual/worldview) individual's realities (hermeneutically). Texts serve as vehicles for elaborating participants' personal perspectives and intensifying direct contact.

Post self-reflection, participants reconvene for a second group reflection, discussing open questions or thoughts and deepening key aspects. Through a creative process, a shared text presents conversation core points and development ("dialogueimpulse"). Each group will conduct individual, unique conversations and compose equally unique dialogueimpulses, even with identical themes and texts. This "dialogueimpulse" serves as connection, memory, strengthens participant's relationships and can be presented at multireligious celebrations.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Field Research Overview

Research subjects comprise SR processes with four different DACH region groups. Given declining SR trends in German-speaking regions, experimental groups form universities, online research and interreligious work environment contacts. SR processes will not be led by myself but by former participants and initiators experienced in SR method, ensuring neutrality and reflexive perspective maintenance. Field observations allow comparison with interview statements and objectivity verification. Method reproducibility and independence from individual persons can be examined.
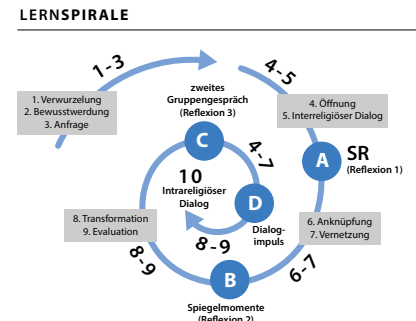
A factor list identifies nine factors influencing SR processes, categorized as: **Organizational** (duration, preparation time, regularity, location), **Group dynamics** (group size, composition, atmosphere), and **Personal** (motivation, prior experience, openness to dialogue). This list will be completed for each field process.

Four research fields include: **(1) classic SR workshop** (3-5 hours, 10-15 participants, academic context at university); **(2) Interreligious organization SR series** (online, 4-5 weeks, 1.5-2 hours weekly, 8-12 participants, interreligious facilitators) **(3) Intercultural/interreligious SR with dialogueimpulse** (2 Friday evenings, 2 hours each, University students or generally people interested in interreligious dialogue) **(4) NGO SR seminar** (2-3 days, 15-30 participants, open for (young) adults interested in interreligious dialogue). These fields yield 40-50 interviews with willing participants and moderators, sufficient for drawing research conclusions.

3.2 Semi-Structured Guideline Interviews

Interview questions encompass not only SR process itself but participants' interreligious life experiences, comprehensively assessing (interreligious learning competency) development. The learning spiral emerges from SR itself, Rötting's learning circle (2011:27), and associated competencies. Rötting's learning circle shows interreligious learning as a ten-step process divided into four phases: new experience (Experience), processing (Reflection), active utilization (Conception), adaptation or rejection (Action) (Kolb 1984).

Content validity is secured through interview guidelines and provisional category discussion with experts from religious studies and interreligious practice fields, adjusted accordingly. Pre-test with selected former participants verifies question comprehensibility and fit. My role as researcher undergoes continuous reflection to minimize interpretation distortions through regular self-reflection and researcher exchange.

3.3 Evaluation Procedures

Evaluation relies on field research data, participant and moderator interview analysis. Philipp Mayring's "Qualitative Content Analysis" (2015) provides systematic data processing basis. Interview transcripts undergo multi-step examination for theme-based categories and subcategories (Kuckartz 2016:41) emerging from research questions, SR processes, and reflections. Categories receive detailed content description and concrete text passage (quote) illustration (Kuckartz 2016:37,86). Main categories derive deductively from identified influencing factors and described learning spiral (Kuckartz 2016:64f.); categories and subcategories supplement inductively from material (Schreier 2013:253).

Field research interest lies in structured participant observation (Schnell et al. 2018:357) of overall process and participant interactions. Conversation audio tracks are recorded and later transcribed, verifying what was said and how, to compare to later interview reproduction. Field notes and diary are maintained. With consent, visual recordings support reproduction and verification. These measures secure objectivity and reproducibility. Spoken content is related to other participants' reactions (verbal response, gesture, facial expression).

Interviews constitute essential research components. Only interviews and field observation analysis comparison allow more precise assessment. Interviews can confirm or falsify field observations from participant perspectives. Individual interreligious learning competency development or triggered processes are determined through interview statement categorization and coding. MAXQDA computer software manages categories representing competencies and additional factors. This qualitative content analysis enables systematic, comprehensible evaluation identifying answers to: individual learning process statements and comparability; self-recognized learning competencies; self-identified influencing factors; field research-interview differences; similar/comparable learning experiences; religion-specific comparable experiences; factor roles.

4. Expected Results and Research Contribution

Core interest lies in offering research-supported methods and effectiveness for interreligious groups' practical work. The goal is determining for which interreligious group (constellations) and religious/spiritual individuals SR in which form constitutes effective interreligious dialogue encounter tools. Focus lies on presenting learnable interreligious learning competencies through SR considering influencing factors.

This research contributes to applied religious studies in: **(1)** SR process criticism validation or falsification; **(2)** DACH region declining SR development reasons; **(3)** Identified factor effects of different SR processes on participant and moderator learning competencies; **(4)** Providing empirical analysis data for important IRD method reflection.

Timeline: WS 2025/2026 (Proposal submission/defense); WS 2025/2026 & SS 2026 (Field research and interviews); WS 2026/2027 (Transcription & analysis); SS 2027 (Discussion & writing); WS 2027/2028 (Corrections); SS 2028 (Dissertation submission).

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Footnotes:

[1] Interreligious competencies and interreligious learning competencies differ insofar as interreligious competencies are abilities emerging from action, while interreligious learning competencies represent further steps where practice-learned content undergoes reflection, conscious learning processes rethinking and developing one's own perspective.

[2] Online research in the DACH region (Ecosia search: "Scriptural Reasoning") yielded few university and individual non-university reports of past SR events for 2024/25. Contact attempts with organizers met limited success.