DISSERTATION PROJECT – Melanie Fersi

Doctoral program in Religious Studies

Supervisor: Assoz.-Prof. Dr. Martin Rötting (Paris Lodron University Salzburg, Austria)

Co-Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Naurath (University Augsburg, Germany)

_____

Working title

"Interreligious places as learning spaces for peace building in interfaith dialogue. A comparative analysis using the example of the College of Interreligious Studies München, the Al Amana Centre (Muscat) and the Graduate School UGM (Yogyakarta)**"**

Theoretical Background:

Interreligious places play an important role for peace building in interfaith dialogue. They see themselves as "safe spaces" (concept of "third space" according to Bhaba 1994), as spaces of encounter and learning and they play an active role through opening up a communication space in which people enter into relationships with each other. They provide various formats for encounter in order to structure this communication (Rötting 2020: 29 [translated from German]). However, this research project takes a different perspective on the effects of the dynamic transformation taking place between learning places in a socio-historical and cultural context, and on the individual participants. It focuses on the individuals involved: It is the individuals who engage with the learning space that set the dynamic in motion, thereby creating a learning space. Firstly, the individual experts working at the learning institution try their best to turn their institution's vision into an effective programme using appropriate methods. They shape the group dynamics of the participants according to their objectives, bringing their own identity to the space. Secondly the participating individuals interact with the learning space (for example with concepts, in programs, through methods, and their practical experience with the participating group) and thereby become actors through a transformation process (Latour 2007) themselves. They interpret experiences based on their mental spaces. They bring their biography, or "spiritual identity as life path navigation" (Rötting 2019) to the learning space in the form of subjective narratives (Ricoeur 1988). They give meaning to experiences of relationship negotiations that are embedded in the socio-historical-cultural context of the place. This enters them into a process of interreligious learning (Rötting 2007 & 2008; Dehn 2014). Thereby they are constantly recreating the space (Lefebvre 1991). The intention of this research project is therefore to investigate how interreligious learning processes (at an individual level) and the creation of interreligious learning spaces (at a collective level) are connected, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the grammar / formular of peace building in interreligious dialogue. The aim is to find out which peace building processes are promoted by learning processes in contextually different learning places / environments. The following research questions are the focus of interest:

How do the ways in which participants 'relate'/ 'engage'/ 'interact' to/with interreligious learning places provide insight into a grammar of interreligious dialogue? What aspects of peace building can be achieved in interreligious learning spaces?

Institutions participating:

The research project is the subject of a doctoral thesis in Religious Studies at the Paris Lodron University of Salzburg. The doctoral candidate is supervised by Prof. Martin Rötting and Prof. Elisabeth Naurath (University of Augsburg). The doctoral candidate uses the 'Interfaith Photovoice' method for learning and research purposes in the tradition of participatory action research. To this end, she underwent a training to become a certified "Interfaith Photovoice" facilitator with the method's founder, Dr. Roman Williams. Through her many years of work at the College of Interreligious Studies in Munich, she developed and successfully applied the innovative concept for the project „*Sharing Interreligious Learning Processes through Interfaith Photovoice*". This project forms the basis for the comparative analysis, that will be conducted at the College of Interreligious Studies in Munich, the Al Amana Centre in Muscat, and the Graduate School UGM in Yogyakarta.

Objectives:

The objectives of this research project are to investigate how interreligious learning processes (on an individual level) and the production of interreligious learning spaces (on a collective level) are connected in order to gain a deeper understanding of a grammar / formular of peace building in interfaith dialogue. The aim is to find out which peace building processes are promoted by the learning processes at contextually different places / environments of learning. The success of the peace-building processes in the learning spaces will be measured through a participatory action research project. At the end the aim is to develop grammars of the learning spaces for the three learning locations in Munich, Muscat, and Yogyakarta. These grammars will serve as a basis for formulating a hypothesis about the connections between learning processes, the participants' "relating" / "engaging" and "interacting" to the spaces, and the social production of the interreligious learning spaces.

Research Design:

The planned dissertation is situated in the field of applied religious studies (cf. Rötting 2024: 27ff.) and as a place of reflection (cf. Koch & Lehmann 2021: 9f.): Through a comparative analysis of contextually different interreligious learning places as concrete contexts, the aim is to gain reflective knowledge in religious studies (data genesis), develop theory through the analysis results, and ultimately gain insights for practical application.

Although interdisciplinary spatial theory (Schroer 2006; Knott 2013 & 2015; Kalender 2023; Nagel 2015, Ipgrave et al. 2019; Fitriyah, Hedges & Rötting 2025; Sander 2019) provides important impulses for this work, heuristic models for a grammar / formular of the learning place / space had to be developed for the present research desideratum "Interreligious places as learning spaces for peace education in interreligious dialogue," which intertwine virulent spatial-theoretical aspects relating to the collective level with the individual level. To this end, theoretical connections between Lefebvre's spatial theory (1991 & 2006), the sociological-collective aspects of actor-network theory according to Latour (2007), and the individual

learning processes according to Rötting (2007 & 2008) and Dehn (2014) were combined and translated into a grammar / formular of a learning space. This made it possible to identify the categories that should be the subjects of research using an appropriate methodological design.

Methodology:

The research project aims to understand the complex functioning of interreligious learning spaces, focusing particularly on the individuals involved. This is achieved by developing a methodological design that enables the spaces of experience and learning to be visualised through the eyes of the participants and those working in these interreligious places. Comprehensive data is generated through a combination of visual material and associated narratives using a triangulation of research methodologies in the tradition of visual anthropology (Photovoice, Photo Elicitation and Visual Ethnography). The complexity of learning and experience processes also necessitates catalyzing intensive reflection processes through the "Interfaith Photovoice" learning and research method (Williams, Holtmann & Sachs 2025) and involving individuals in the research process as co-researchers through participatory action research. To this end, the innovative project concept "Sharing Interreligious Learning Processes through Interfaith Photovoice" has been developed and tested several times at the College of Interreligious Studies in Munich. As in health sciences (Wang & Burris 1997), educational sciences (Latz, Phelps-Ward, Royer & Peters 2015; Cook & Quiqley 2013; Bachlmayer 2022; Lemmer 2025), political sciences (Brenner 2024) and sociological studies (Williams 2012), Photovoice is also used here to encourage communities and individuals to share their experiences and perspectives through photography.

As pioneering work in the field of applied religious studies (cf. Rötting 2024: 27ff.) in German-speaking countries, this research project follows the participatory action research approach of a series of studies in the sociology of religion (Williams et al. 2019; Holtmann et al. 2020; Williams, Holtmann & Sachs 2025) that use the Photovoice method to explore lived religion and simultaneously promote spaces for interreligious encounter, transferring it to the field of interreligious places as learning spaces for peacebuilding in interreligious dialogue.

The unique methodological design for the workshop sessions can be integrated into any learning space as a supplement to the regular program. Participants from the interreligious places will be given the role of co-researcher:

They reflect on their experiences and learning processes during their time at the learning place, taking pictures according to a proven shooting script developed on the basis of the "Interreligious dialogue as a learning process" theory (Rötting 2007 & 2008). They then discuss these pictures in structured dialogues with others, finding categories for peace-building and learning processes. Finally, they share these pictures with people from outside in a picture exhibition. Participants take part in photo-based, semi-structured interviews using the photo-elicitation research method (Harper 2002; Williams 2012). The group processes in the Photovoice projects are visually recorded through photographs (Pink 2011). Selected conversations from the group discussions are recorded on mobile phones. These are supplemented by field notes and a research diary (Emerson et al. 2010), in order to minimise the potential for affective bias on the part of the researcher.

The Interfaith Photovoice method, as applied in this project, has multiple effects. Firstly, discussing self-created photographs relating to one's personal learning journey is a creative approach that enables individuals to comprehend and connect their experiences. Additionally, sharing visual narratives makes the layers of reflection visible and tangible to others. Windows are opened into the worlds of the respective individuals, allowing specialist knowledge about different religions to be linked to narratives of "real people" with whom they have shared experiences during their participation.

In addition, two experts from each learning place / environment are asked to take photos that capture the key features of the place. These photos will also form the basis for semi-structured, photo-assisted interviews. By combining visual material and the corresponding narratives, the researcher gains a visual impression of the learning space through the 'eyes of the experts'. This data will then be compared with the self-portrayals on the websites. The researcher will also be guided through the learning places on site.

Data Analysis

In one phase of the Photovoice projects, an initial categorisation takes place through inductive reflection on joint learning processes with the participants. This is also an opportunity to discuss the things that were not photographed. The researcher then undertakes a further phase of category formation (Mayring 2015), analysing the photos, accompanying narratives, group discussion recordings and and the data from the individual interviews using MAXQDA. These results are then checked deductively against a criteria catalogue, which can be used to measure the success of the peace education processes in the learning space. This set of criteria was developed based on the current state of research into the areas of Interfaith Dialogue (Schüler 2009; Koch & Lehmann 2021; Klinkhammer 2019; Hintersteiner 2003; Bechmann 2012; Vogt 2018; Bernhardt 2019; Weiße 2012; Rötting 2007; Lehmann & Brodeur 2021; Mitias 2021; Sundermeuer 1991; Rötting 2008; Schambeck 2013; Gmainer-Pranzl 2010), Interreligious Learning (Unser 2021 & 2022; Leimgruber 2012; Rötting 2007 & 2008 & 2011 & 2019; Betz 2018; Leurle 2021; Dehn 2014) , Peace Research (Delhom 2019; Lederach 1997 & 2005; Galtung 1976) and Peace Pedagogy (Naurath 2010 & 2022) within the fields of religious studies, theology and religious education. As a final step, grammars of the learning spaces are formulated for the respective contexts and checked in a comparison of the individual and collective levels to see to what extent the "inner" spaces of the individuals are reflected in the production of the learning space.

References:

Bachlmayer, Magdalena Sophie (2022): Student Engagement and Wellbeing. Eine Photovoice-Studie zur Lernumgebung von Master-Lehramtsstudierende der Sekundarstufe

Bhabha, Homi K. (1994): The Location of Culture. 2. Auflage. London, New York: Routledge.

Bechmann, Ulrike (2012): Interreligiöser Dialog und Religionswissenschaft. Zwischen Analyse und Engagement.In: Michael Stausberg (Hrsg.): Religionswissenschaft. De Gruyter Studium. S. 449 – 462**.**

Bernhardt, Reinhold (2019): Inter-Religio. Das Christentum in Beziehung zu anderen Religionen. Zürich.

Betz, Andrea (2018): Interreligiöse Bildung und Vorurteile. Eine empirische Studie über Einstellungen zu religiöser Differenz. Berlin.

Brenner, Noam (2024): Liminal logic. Peacebuilding and Photovoice in Jerusalem. Geoforum.

Cook, Kristin & Quiqley, Cassie F. (2013): Connecting to Our Community: Utilizing Photovoice as a Pedagogical Tool to Connect College Students to Science

Dehn, Ulrich (2014): Annäherungen an Religion. Religionswissenschaftliche Erwägungen und interreligiöser Dialog. EB Verlag. Berlin.

Delhom, Pascal (2019): Die Rolle des Vertrauens für eine interreligiöse und interkulturelle Begegnung in Friedensfragen. In Jäger & Anselm (Hrsg.): Ethik in Pluralen Gesellschaften. Grundsatzfragen. Band 3. Springer VS. Wiesbaden

Emerson Robert M. et al. (2010): Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. University of Chicago Press.

Fittriyah, Lauilatul; Hedges, Paul & Rötting, Martin (2025): Interreligigious Landscapes: Theory, Spaces, and Migration in Global Setting“. In Lily Kong, Orlando Woods, Justing K.H. Tse (Hrsg.): Handbook of the Geographies of Religions. Springer International Handbooks of Human Geography. (IHHG). 227-250.

Galtung, Johann (1976): Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization. International Peace Research Institute Oslo; Sage Publications, Inc.

Gmainer-Pranzl, Franz (2010): Die Hermeneutik Gadamers als Herausforderung interkultureller und interreligiöser Dialoge. Vortrag an der University of Religions and Denominations in Qom (Iran) am 2.11.2010 sowie am Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies Teheran (Iran) am 3.11.2010.

Harper, Douglas (2002): Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation. In: Visual Studies 17(1): 13–26.

Holtmann, Catherine; Robinson, Emma & Williams, Roman (2020): Interfaith Photovoice: an example of Muslim-Christian engagement in Canada. Visual Studies.

Ipgrave, Julia et. Al (2019): Introduction: Production and Contestation of Meaning in Places of Interreligious Activity. In: Julia Ipgrave (Hg.) Interreligious Engagement in Urban Spaces: Social, Material and Ideological Dimensions. Cham: Springer, 93–110.

Kalender, Mehmet T. (2023): Räumlichkeit und interreligiöse Begegnung. Wechselwirkungen von religiöser Pluralität, Materialität und Interaktion. Religion in Bewegung. Religion in Motion. Band 2. Transcript.

Klinkhammer, Gritt (2019): Der interreligiöse Dialog als Boundary Work. In: ZfR: 27(1): 78-102.

Knott, Kim (2013): The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis. Durham: Acumen.

Knott, Kim (2015): Religion, Raum und Ort. Der Spatial Turn in der Religionsforschung. In: Martin Radermacher, Judith Stander und Annette Wilke (Hg.) 103 Jahre Religionswissenschaft in Münster. Verortungen in Raum und Zeit.Berlin: LIT, 199–225.

Koch, Anne & Lehmann, Karsten (2021): Religionswissenschaft als Reflexionsort und nicht Dienstleisterin in interreligiösen Kontexten. Impulse durch Gouvernementalitätsstudien und Secular Studies. In: Rötting, Martin & Schmiedel, Michael A. (Hg): Religionswissenschaften in interreligiösen Kontexen. LIT Verlag. Wien

Latour, Bruno (2007): Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft. Frankfurt am Main.

Latz, Phelps-Ward, Royer & Peters (2015): Photovoice as Methodology, Pedagogy, and Partnership-Building Tool: A Graduate and Community College Student Collaboration.

Lederach, John Paul (1997): Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. United States Institute of Peace Press. Washington, D.C.

Lederach, John Paul (2005): The Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace. Oxford University Press.

Lefebvre, Henri (1991): The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, Henri (2006): Die Produktion des Raumes. In: Dünne, J. & Günzel, St. (eds). In: Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophoe und Kulturwissenschaften. Berlin. Suhrkamp. 330 – 340.

Leimgruber, Stephan (2012): Interreligiöses Lernen. Kösel. München

Leurle, Christoph (2021): Interreligiöse Lernprozesse bei Lernenden und Lehrenden fördern**.** Ein exploratives Design entwickelt an einer berufsbildenden Schule. Kassel university press.

Lehmann, Karsten & Brodeur, Patrice (2021): Final Remarks. Insights into the Interdisciplinary Field of the Study of Interreligious Dialogue. In: Lehmann (Hrsg.): Talking Dialogue. Eleven Episodes in the History of the Modern Interreligious Dialogue Movement. KAICIID – Beyond Dialogue Series. Volume 2. Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston.

Mayring, Philipp (2015): Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken (12th ed.). Beltz. Weihnheim

Mitias Michael H. (2012): Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue. Interreligious Studies in Theorie and Practice. Palgrave Macmillan. Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth (2015): Kontaktzone oder Spannungsfeld? Multireligiöse Räume in religionssoziologischer Perspektive, in: Beinhauer-Köhler, Bärbel, Mirko Roth, Bernadette Schwarz-Boenneke (Hg.): Viele Religionen - ein Raum?! Analysen, Diskussionen und Konzepte, Berlin, S. 35–54.

Naurath, Elisabeth (2010): Mit Gefühl gegen Gewalt. Mitgefühl als Schlüssel ethischer Bildung in der Religionspädagogik. Neukirchener.

Naurath, Elisabeth (2022): Friedenspädagogik und interreligiöse BIldung. In: Klöcker & Tworuschka (Hrsg.): Handbuch der Religionen 71. EL 2022. XIV – 5.1.2.4.

Pink, Sarah (2011): Doing Visual Ethnography. Second Edition. SAGE Publications.

Ricoeur, Paul (1988): Zeit und historische Erzählung. Zeit und Erzählung. Fink. Paderborn. S. 88.

Rötting, Martin (2007): Interreligiöses Lernen im buddhistisch-christlichen Dialog. Lerntheoretischer Zugang und qualitativ-empirische Untersuchung in Deutschland und Südkorea. EOS Verlag. St. Otilien

Rötting, Martin (2008): Interreligiöse Spiritualität. Verantwortungsvoller Umgang der Religonen. EOS Verlag. St. Otilien.

Rötting, Martin (2019): Navigation. Spirituelle Identität in einer interreligiösen Welt. Fallstudien aus München, Vilnius, Seoul und New York. EOS Verlag. St. Otilien.

Rötting, Martin (2020): Häuser und Räume als interreligiöse Lernorte: Multi-Faith-Spaces, haptische

Versprechen und eine europäische Vision. In: Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift. 24. Jahrgang. 1. Heft 2020. S. 20 – 38.

Rötting (2024): Religionswissenschaft als Angewandte Wissenschaft und Reflexionsort in interreligiösen Kontexten. In: Rötting & Schmiedel (Hg.): Religionswissenschaft in interreligiösen Kontext. LIT Verlag. Wien.

Sander, H. J. (2019): Glaubensräume. In: Topologische Dogmatik 1. Ostfildern: Grünewald.

Unser, Alexander (2021): Forschung, empirisch, interreligiös. In: Das wissenschaftlich-religionspädagogische Lexikon im Internet. Deutsche Bibel Gesellschaft.

Unser, Alexander (2022): Über die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Abbaus von Vorurteilen und Stereotypen durch interreligiöses Lernen. In Korchide / Lindner / Roggenkamp / Sajak / Simijoki (Hg): Stereotype – Vorurteile – Ressentiments. Herausforderungen für das interreligiöse Lernen- Religiöse Bildung Kooperativ. Band 1. V & R. S.147 -164.

Vogt, Markus (2018): Theologie des interreligiösen Dialogs. Einführung und Verortung. Münnchner Theologische Zeitung. 69 (2018/2). EOS editions. Sankt Otilien.

Wang, Caroline & Burris, Mary Ann (1997): Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. In: Education Health and Behavior 24(3): 369–387.

Williams, Roman R. (2012): Constructing a Calling. The Case of Evangelical Christian International Students in the United States. In Sociology of Religion. p. 1-27.

Williams, Roman; Sachs William L., Holtmann, Catherine; van Stee Elena G.; Eekhoff Kaitlyn; Bos, Michael; Amonette, Ammar (2019): Through One Another's Lenses: Photovoice and Interfaith Dialogue. In: Volume 10. Interreligious Dialogue.

Williams Roman R.; Holtmann, Catherine & Sachs, William L. (2025): Sacred Snaps. Photovoice for Interfaith Engagement Routledge, New York.

Weiße, Wolfram (2012): Im Spannungsfeld von Vorurteilen und der Offenheit, auf Andere zuzugehen: BRU 57: Mischen (Im)Possible – Interreligiöses Lernen, S. 42-47.