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Katharina Welling & Bert Roebben

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Reading and reflecting sacred texts in the presence of the other. An empirical study on the use of ‘scriptural reasoning’ in teacher education

Katharina Welling and Bert Roebben
Faculty of Humanities and Theology, TU Dortmund, Dortmund, Germany

ABSTRACT
In this article the method of Scriptural Reasoning (SR), a text-based approach to interreligious dialogue between participants of the three Abrahamic religions, was implemented for a teacher education setting at a German university. Not only students with an outspoken religious conviction but also agnostic and atheist students, preparing themselves to become teachers in public schools, were invited into the conversation. The article documents and discusses the qualitative-empirical research in which the SR meetings were embedded. The aim of the article is not to create a hermeneutical theory for SR but rather to explore how SR as a method, with its specific learning tool of text-work, can be turned into a broader didactical model which can be transferred to other learning environments and which can in the long run provide empirical evidence on successful teacher education in multi-religious and multi-worldview societies and schools.

Introduction
In recent comparative studies on the position and role of religious education (RE) in European schools (Jackson et al. 2007; Loobuyck and Franken 2011; Rothgangel, Jackson, and Jäggle 2014), the actual presence of multi-faith approaches of RE is striking. Even in countries in which traditional confessional RE was and is mainstream, the call for a more informative and a less confessional concept of RE is striking. Even in countries in which traditional confessional RE was and is mainstream, the call for a more informative and a less confessional concept of RE is striking. A good example is the Benelux: in some parts RE actually has been reorganised (e.g. Luxembourg), other regions are in the process of reorganising (e.g. Wallonia, the southern French-speaking part of Belgium) and again other school systems are confronted with positions, challenging the traditional confessional RE, e.g. in Flanders (the northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and in the Netherlands. This article focuses on the situation in German schools and more specifically on the situation in the Land North-Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), in the Western part of Germany, neighbouring the Benelux.

The article reports on an empirical study on the use of Scriptural Reasoning (SR), a method to enhance interreligious dialogue, within the framework of teacher education at...
a German University. The university lies in the centre of the post-industrial Land of NRW and its population (in schools as well in teacher education departments) is characterised by a large heterogeneity of (religious and non-religious) worldviews.

After a contextualisation of the study in the first part of this article, SR is briefly presented in its historical development and its actual form as a method enhancing inter-religious dialogue. We discuss the potential value of SR as a didactic model despite the lack of empirical evidence for this method to date. The third part contains the central questions, the design and the first solid results of the empirical research. Finally, the implications for RE teacher education are discussed as a provisional attempt to answer the central questions of this article: what are the problems, premises and possibilities of the method of SR and its use as a didactical method in the preparation of teacher students in RE?

Context of the research

The basic structure of RE in schools in the Land NRW is – parallel to most parts of Germany (Rothgangel and Ziebertz 2014) – organised along confessional lines: the Land offers the formal framework for RE, the contents however are provided by the Catholic and Protestant churches and by a representation of the Muslim faith communities in the Land. RE within the school curriculum is based on the longstanding German tradition of Bildung: ‘edification of the person’ would be the best translation for the typical German concept of education, with its focus on the human being, discovering meaning in a meaningful world, being led in this endeavour by significant others. In this way religion, worldview and morality are central elements in the school curriculum and are considered to be a support for personal development. The actual situation however is changing dramatically and has a huge impact on the organisation of RE. The confessional model is under pressure: traditional confessional groups are becoming smaller (because of fewer baptisms), religious socialisation through families and faith communities as a precondition for confessional RE is gradually disappearing, worldview diversity is fragmenting (including more and more atheist and agnostic perspectives on life) and ‘believing without belonging’ (Grace Davie) is shaping the agenda of many young people. Strong empirical evidence is underpinning this development (Hütte and Mette 2003; Roebben and Dommel 2013; Rothgangel, Lück, and Klutz 2017).

The two mainline churches in Germany are responding to the situation in an affirmative way (Die deutschen Bischöfe 2016; Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2014). Confessional RE remains the default position. Cooperation between the two confessions however is a first and well considered and careful step in addressing the situation. The conversation has been started and is based on the assumption that these forms of cooperation can stimulate the ‘dialogical and communicative competence’ (Gärtner 2015, 172) of young people. Beyond the confessional-cooperative approach, the formal opening of RE to interreligious and inter-worldview encounters is presently debated. The educational poles for this approach would then be: ‘identity and commitment’ or ‘strengthening roots and engaging in encounter’ (172). On grass roots level small exciting new projects are providing a platform for this shift.
However, an officially approved interreligious (including, e.g. Islamic perspectives) and/or inter-worldview (including, e.g. atheist perspectives) curriculum of RE in NRW classrooms – possibly and reasonably in alternation with traditional confessional RE components – is still a long way off. Our issue is: how should future RE teachers be prepared to address this evolving situation? And to make things even more complicated: how shall this happen, taking into account that RE students themselves have been growing up in contexts of hyper-pluralism, that they themselves struggle with issues of religious identity, such as ‘why to be religious at all and how to live up to my religious position in a complex variety of positions?’ In this article personal identity is considered to be a dynamic process between the perception of the self and of the other (Altmeyer 2016) and is the (always provisional) result of interaction and negotiation processes (Bewersdorff 2003, 13). If the child and the young person have a right to discover their identity in a learning process ‘in the presence of the (religious and non-religious) other’, then this should be the case for the future teacher as well.

This situation formed the backdrop for our study on SR. It is a substantial part of a larger research project on dealing with diversity in RE in the public school of NRW and on the specific role of the teacher. More concrete implementations, mainly based on sacred texts (such as this project), sacred space (e.g. Gärtner and Bettin 2016) and sacred rituals (e.g. De Wildt 2014), are urgently needed to understand how the multilayered phenomenon of religious and non-religious meaning giving takes shape in schools in general and in RE classes specifically, and how RE teachers can be prepared to be guides in re-creating the classroom into an inclusive place for living and learning in the presence of the other.

**SR and its application in teacher education**

*Short historical sketch and the method of SR today*

With its origins in the 1920s, the SR movement aimed to counteract an increasing political effort to ostracise interreligious differences for the sake of encouraging putative peace (postliberal particularism instead of liberal pluralism). Against this background, Scriptural Reasoners regarded interreligious dialogue as desirable, allowing for the articulation of ‘core identities’ (Moyaert 2013, 65) of religions and thereby facilitate a ‘respectful disagreement’ (65) between different worldviews (64–65). The specific method of SR has its roots in the Jewish context and arose from the dialogical practice of textual-reasoning, which was invented by a number of postmodern-thinkers of the Academy of Jewish Philosophy, namely Steven Kneses, Peter Ochs and Robert Gibbs. This practise was based on the Hebrew Bible, on rabbinic commentaries and philosophical texts (68). In a following stage of development in the early 1990s, mainly Christian theologians engaged in the text-based dialogues, with the beginning of the 2000s more and more Muslim participants came along as well. From then on the method focused on the dialogical reflection of excerpts from the particular holy texts and how they can be connected to one another under overarching themes. Consequentially textual reasoning developed into
what is now called SR, which initially addressed members of the Abrahamic religions mainly (Moyaert 2013, 70).

A typical SR-meeting includes three discussions each lasting approximately 1.5 hours with between six and 12 participants. Every session serves to examine one of the three text excerpts: Firstly, one of the beforehand appointed so-called ‘Presenters’ reads the excerpt out loud to the group and provides a short introduction to the topic. Following that, participants discuss their first impressions and potential questions about the excerpt. Subsequently, the text and its implicit propositions are explained and reflected upon in order to place them in the context of the participants’ living environment, thereby endorsing a deeper level of SR. At the end of each session, participants’ summarise their new insights in a few sentences (thus the description of the process according to the website of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme 2017).

The Belgian theologian Marianne Moyaert offers the following metaphor to illustrate the process in which SR is imbedded: the participant’s starting point is the so-called ‘house of faith’, where religious identity finds its origin. This is the place where ordinary life of faith happens, the place where a person comes to know one’s own religion and traditions. Moyaert uses the symbol of a path or spiritual journey that begins at the moment in which a person stops to recoil from reflecting his/her religious convictions in the mirror of present age and allows herself to look at it with a view to the future, understanding her faith commitment no longer merely in agreement with clearly defined doctrines. On this path, the SR participants experience the tent as a place of encounter and dialogue between members of different religions. In this context, travellers take in two different roles. On the one hand, they are hosts, inviting the religious other to conquer borders between their religious worldviews and to get to know one another, while on the other hand, they are themselves guests in another’s religion. The image of the tent can thus be seen as the actual location of SR. However, the effect of the dialogue is in principle intended to flourish even further after the encounter, when new perceptions are reflected upon and shared with those who stayed at home (Moyaert 2013, 73–77).

**SR in search of a theory? Or rather in search of a didactical model?**

The above mentioned metaphor could suggest that the SR process can be embedded theoretically in comparative theology. According to the German comparative theologian Klaus von Stosch, participants in an interreligious dialogue mentally exit their own traditions, they enter the dialogue with the other religious persons and finally they return to their own tradition by reflecting the new insights in a private context (Von Stosch 2012). Besides this analogy, there is however an important difference between SR and comparative theology. The German religious pedagogue Claus-Peter Sajak argues: comparative theology at the one hand aims at defining the different truth claims of religions in order to compare them and to grasp the most appropriate way to talk about God. SR (as a trialogic praxis) at the other hand aims at introducing the participants into a constructive conversation on faith and, in doing so, at enhancing understanding, respect and recognition of each other’s religious position (Sajak 2015, 45). SR does not focus on an
ultimate consensus, but on ‘learning in the presence of the other’ (Boys and Lee 2006), on mutual understanding, on respectful disagreement if needed, and on gaining new insights in one’s own religion or worldview. In this respect SR is an exercise in reflecting one’s own conviction, habitus and identity in the light of the encounter and discourse with immediate others in the actual interreligious learning process – which is according to the German religious educationalist Stefan Leimgruber (2012, 101–104) the ‘royal way’ for doing interreligious dialogue.

SR with its specific textual approach (texts as learning tools) and its exchange between participants on the basis of these texts is as such merely a method. The theoretical foundation is lacking.

‘Scriptural Reasoning, it is invariable emphasized, is not a theory that is turned into practice but rather a practice about which one can theorize (Kepnes 2006, 370). Up until the present there does not exist an encompassing theological, philosophical, and/or hermeneutical framework in which the principles of this practice are theorized’ (Moyaert 2013, 72)

More urgent however than a theory is the need for a generative didactical framework in which new developments of and contexts for SR can be included, researched and evaluated. We believe that through a transfer of empirical research on the method of SR in the context of teacher education the possibility of developing such a didactical model is given. We are convinced that SR is helpful and can be successful in the preparation of future teachers for pluralised societies and schools. But there is no empirical evidence on how to define successful learning outcomes of SR and under which preconditions or criteria effective interreligious learning through SR in teacher education can be realised. Our aim is to examine carefully in an empirically controlled setting in which SR as dialogical and interreligious method functions and how this can contribute to the development of a didactical model for SR in teacher education and, eventually in the long run, to the conception of background theories. In the following figure our research is visualised as the gradual development from SR as a method (with its specific learning tools) into SR as a model for interreligious dialogue.

**Figure 1.** SR: From Tool to Model.
Research project: design, central questions and results

Design and central questions

At Dortmund University the current study guidelines provide students of Catholic Theology with a Catholic-confessional approach to theology, which means that interreligious learning experiences can only be made in indirect ways, for instance during their internships in schools and their informal encounters with others on campus. Consequently, by implementing SR at the university, a dialogical experience was made possible for students in Catholic theology. In this way, interreligious learning in its narrow sense (Leimgruber 2012, 21) for the first time became part of a regular module of Catholic theology.

In the course of the diversity seminar embedded in the bachelor programme of Catholic theology, alongside students of Catholic and Protestant theology, participants from a Muslim background took part in SR. Due to the fact that prospective teachers not only face the challenge of a religiously plural student body, but also that of a general plurality of individual worldviews, we decided to extend the concept of SR to include a philosophical component as well. For that reason, students of philosophy, who regarded themselves as atheists, joined the dialogue. We are aware that this changed the original concept of SR. This change however honoured radically the ongoing diversification of worldviews in German schools. Consequently, the dialogue did not only focus on passages from the Bible and the Quran but also on excerpts of philosophical texts. After a short introduction to the method of SR and an independent familiarisation with the text of each student, a researcher (KW) held the dialogue on two days with two research groups respectively.

Each research group was made up of four students of Catholic theology, one student of Protestant theology, two self-proclaimed atheist philosophy students and three students with a Muslim background. The selection of the participants was based on pragmatic reasons: their presence in teacher education in Dortmund. The theology and philosophy students were randomly selected out of a BA course on diversity. Because the university does not offer a course on Islamic theology, the participants from a Muslim background came from different fields of study and were approached through social media and personal contacts. In the course of a qualitative fieldwork, the researcher (KW) took up the role of the convener to take part in the dialogue as participant observer. From this perspective a partly standardised protocol was prepared. To facilitate more objectivity, an additional researcher took an outside perspective, from which she observed and recorded the dialogue as well. Furthermore, both SR sessions were video recorded to avoid a possible observation bias, resulting in 12 hours of video material. The main data basis was constituted by nine semi-structured interviews, in which students reflected on their dialogue experiences retrospectively.

Both the observation protocols and the interviews were analysed according to the qualitative content analysis of Mayring (2010). The data obtained from the ethnographic field observations, as documented by the video recordings and the observation protocol, served as additional value. As such, they were supposed to offer valuable clues about the actual problems and chances occurring in the dialogue, in the way they were expressed verbally and reflected afterwards in the interviews (triangulation). Two concerns about the position and the role of the researcher should be mentioned here as well. Because the researcher (KW) serves also as a regular examiner for the students of the two research groups, a biased opinion of those students could probably not be excluded. Moreover the researcher herself could have been emotionally biased because of her belonging to the group of Catholic
Christians. A completely objective perception and evaluation of the materials are therefore impossible, but can be optimised by an often repeated viewing of the video material, by the researcher herself and/or by other researchers.

On the basis of the acquired data, the following research questions were to be answered:

- Which dimensions of religious learning (learning about, from, and in/through religion) do students experience in interreligious/inter-worldview dialogues as a way of ‘learning in the presence of the other’?
- Where do students place their focus in reflecting and evaluating the experiences that they gained in dialogue?
- What are emerging perspectives based on an SR-driven interreligious/inter-worldview learning experience for teacher education?

**Results of the study**

After a multiple assessment of the video material and the nine interviews – three with students of Catholic theology, three with philosophy students who considers themselves as atheists and three with Muslim students, the following research results can be reliably deducted as first tendencies and implications from the data. More detailed results can be expected in the future.

**Dimensions of ‘learning in the presence of the other’ based on SR**

Bert Roebben describes the dialogue as a place of ‘threefold speaking’ (Roebben 2016a, 93). According to this theory, the dialogical process allows for learning ‘about, from and in/through’ religion, three dimensions that mutually influence one another and become pillars of a dynamic and fruitful dialogue (Roebben 2016b, 13–18). The content of the interreligious dialogue based on the method of SR and the students’ retrospective reflection of this experienced content mirror these three dimensions comprehensively.

Firstly, **learning about religion** occurs especially in relation to the perception of similarities and differences between the religions. Exemplary for similarities are the shared belief in a creational God as well as common conceptions of morality. Elementary differences manifest themselves in the Trinitarian theology of Christianity, the Jinn-belief of Islam and the seemingly literal understanding of the Quran, especially with regard to the story of creation. Added to that, there is a dissociation of Feuerbach’s criticism on religion, that once more reveals the shared belief of both religions in a creator God.

Secondly, **learning from religion** manifests itself in the observations and interviews especially in the perspective-taking part of the dialogue that aims to demonstrate the vulnerability of the religious/worldview other. Furthermore, students report to have perceived their dialogical partners as friendly and open, which fostered a reduction of their own prejudices. In general, students seem to regard the acceptance of differences as an advantageous starting point to encounter one another in the dialogue. Respectively, the deeper evaluation of these differences is regarded as helpful to avoid barriers between different worldviews that are often rooted in a lack of knowledge of the other. Confronting areas of tension and the dealing with the entailed emotional reactions are perceived as a preparation for an everyday life in religious and non-religious plurality.
Thirdly, the interreligious learning process that results from factual knowledge and interaction facilitates the learning in/through religion. As an example, we could refer to the insights of the students concerning their expressiveness and perception of knowledge gaps when it comes to their own religion and the corresponding vulnerability. Added to that, it should be noted that whilst participants did not report a direct influence of their dialogical experience on their original religious/non-religious identity, their perspectives on their own convictions seem to have been firmly broadened: through a reflection of the own belief in relation to the other, participants were forced to explain their own stance to others and thus, check its plausibility.

**Students’ focus in reflecting the experience of SR retrospectively**

All nine interviewees took a positive experience not only from the dialogue in itself but also from their partners as open, friendly and willing to share information. Their central concerns and thoughts can be summarised as follows:

With regard to the group of Muslim students it is striking to learn that the three interviewed students focus mainly on the perception of their own religion in confrontation with the ‘strange’ viewpoints of the others. For example, one of the Muslim students describes the way in which she examined the Christian worldview and the religion-critical approaches in particular by putting both explicitly in relation to her own faith. By means of the metaphor, she explains how she found her way back to her own spiritual path and eventually returned to her ‘house of faith’ after the dialogue, the foundation of which had been expanded by the newly gained experiences (she illustrates this using the analogy of newly painted walls in the house).

The Catholic participants firstly admit their inarticulateness about expressing their own faith context, which relates to the challenge they experience to articulate hitherto unquestioned beliefs in a way that is graspable enough for the others to understand. Furthermore, they describe their immense respect for the vulnerability of the other participants. One participant explains that this respect worked as an inhibiting factor especially in the beginning of the dialogue. In this, she assigns the religious participants a larger vulnerability than the atheist participants, the reason for which she identifies in the personal and intimate character of religious faith. Finally the three interviewees thematise the positive ways in which the direct encounter helped them to reduce prejudices about the other religions.

The students of philosophy understood the main purpose of the dialogue as the acquisition of background knowledge about the respective religions. They furthermore evaluate the opportunity to ask critical questions during the dialogue as especially positive. However, they see a need for clarification in the context of scientifically proven topics. They refer especially to the fact that one of the Muslim participants rejected the evaluation theory as untenable in contrast to the story of creation that is told in the Quran. The three philosophy students also mention the fact that during the dialogue they felt sometimes demoted by the believing participants. They refer in this respect, for example, to the statement of some of the religious dialogue partners who argued that for them it is unthinkable to understand how the meaning of live can be penetrated without a foundational faith perspective.

**Interreligious/inter-worldview dialogue in university teacher education?**

In the course of the interviews, participants were asked to give their opinion on the possible role of interreligious and inter-worldview dialogue in the university teacher education. The
Muslim participants consider it especially relevant in the present-day multi-religious and multicultural society to be able to rely on a RE that is less confessional. The necessity for this radical rethinking of RE should be based, according to one participant, on the aim of facilitating a peaceful togetherness. Therefore schools should make more room for communication and discussion. In her opinion, this requires open and well-informed teachers who are respectful for all religions and who are therefore prepared to deal with religious heterogeneity during their own studies. In order to support future RE teachers, the three Muslim interviewees emphasise the need for interaction between the three Abrahamic religions. Only when the exchange of faith contents and faith experiences takes place, teachers can find strength and empathy to deal with religious heterogeneous classes. One Muslim student emphasises the need to start with this kind of interaction already at the university and to continue this kind of effort in the collegium of teachers at school.

Of course, teachers can belong to a confession, but they must be open-minded and well-informed about other confessions. That is why it is problematic, if for example teacher students of Catholic religion are only prepared for teaching Catholic pupils. In this case it will be hard for them to break borders for example Islam or Judaism. That is why interreligious learning must be involved in the teacher education of theology. (Kiraz, Muslim student of Engineering)

The students of Catholic theology emphasise that they consider the interreligious dialogue as enriching the educational preparation for their future profession as a teacher of religion. The three of them correspond in the viewpoint that RE can offer a chance for exchange between religious communities. The role of the teacher should according to them be mainly consisting in addressing cultural and religious conflicts aptly. This implies for them the need to acquire routine interreligious encounters, which can be achieved, for example, by SR. They describe especially their experiences with the dialogue as a way of coming to terms with the vulnerability of the position of others and of themselves. According to them the dialogue opens up opportunities to identify weaknesses in the articulation of one's own faith, that the traditional university approach (i.e. the confessional one) cannot facilitate. This is good because only if weaknesses are acknowledged, they can be mitigated. One participant argues:

During that part of dialogue that focused on the Bible text we also talked about trinity. That was when I actually tried for the first time to really explain something about my own faith. In university, we usually learn facts that we must remember and that's it. However, neither in our everyday life nor in university, we find ourselves in situations in which we must explain something like the doctrine of the two natures [of Christ] with own words to others. And that is why it was not only nice to get to know other worldviews but also to recognize one's own weakness in expressing contents of faith. (Kirsten, Christian student of Catholic Theology)

The students of philosophy, also preparing themselves for future teaching, consider the integration of the interreligious and inter-worldview dialogue to be a plausible step within the curriculum of teacher education. This kind of cooperation between theology and philosophy in a university setting is according to them highly meaningful, especially because of the significant number of non-believers in society. One participant argues:

It was very useful to involve teacher students of philosophy in Scriptural Reasoning. Based on their faith in God as their common component, Muslims, Christians and Jews agree with each other in many points. This does not apply for agnostics and atheists, who however are a relevant part of today's society. This is the reason why the circle of them who are in dialogue must be widened so that we have at least an inter-worldview-dialogue. (Jonas, philosophy student without religious conviction)
Implications for RE teacher education: possibilities, premises and problems

Possibilities

In case of a fruitful interreligious/inter-worldview dialogue the participants experience a ‘threethfold speaking’: communication with objective information sources (learning about), with inter-subjective conversation partners (learning from) and with the subjective voice of their own position (learning in/through). Based on the dialogue about and with others an intra-religious learning process is enabled. The own position is then reflected, articulated, questioned and redefined in the face of unfamiliar points of view. The process of searching answers to the question ‘Who am I?’ is then consequently activated.

In a school context teachers are responsible for supporting the dialogue between young people of diverse living environments, students having different religious backgrounds and worldviews. To accomplish this, teachers themselves must become partners in the ongoing dialogue that initiates a stimulus of finding answers to the question ‘Who am I’? However, being capable of supporting others in their quest for identity, authenticity and responsibility implies (relatively) established personal identities. By the interplay of the three religious-learning dimensions, which could be found empirically in all the above-mentioned research sessions, interreligious-dialogue in theological teacher education can empower teacher education students to strengthen their own identity, making them adequate partners in dialogue for students in their coming teacher profession.

Premises

With regard to a fruitful concretisation of the interreligious dialogue in SR the following aspects should be considered. First of all an atmosphere of sincerity and trust is needed. This can be influenced positively when the participants can learn to know each other better, irrespective of their religious or worldview background. In this respect the conviviality of having refreshments and meals together between the working sessions and the openness for a flexible working scheme are important factors for a successful learning process.

The rules for SR, which can be adapted generally in every sort of interreligious dialogue, should be ‘learned by heart’, before the meeting, so that they can be activated without problem and hesitation during the SR exercise. An intensive discussion and reflection, and if needed an instruction into these rules, is a necessary precondition.

And finally the role of the convener is of the utmost importance. Especially in the case in which students participate for the first time in an SR exercise, the uncertainties and open questions are manifold. In this respect both a flexible facilitating competence and a solid foundation in the complex process of SR is expected from the convener in order to give the participants enough orientation and security.

Problems

The inter-subjective encounter in a safe learning environment (the ‘learning from’ aspect) opens the space for a peaceful and direct commitment to, articulation of and reflection of the other’s and one’s own position. It makes the participants aware of the vulnerability of a dialogical position and can support them in learning to see their ‘vulnerable differences’ as a ‘productive strength’ in future hyper-diverse societies. There are however no didactic
shortcuts for this ideal of growing in shared humanity, based on the method of SR. It is a long road to get there. Two problems should be mentioned. First of all, solid background knowledge may not be neglected: it does have an important impact on the quality of the dialogue. The outspoken text-based approach of SR implies a first strong orientation into the typical text elements and structures and into the specific hermeneutical keys to the text at stake. Dangerous ‘Halbwissen’ (the German for knowing only half of the structure and meaning of a text) can interfere heavily during the conversation and can interrupt the process.

A second problem is the phantasm that everything goes always smoothly in the interreligious dialogue. This is often not the case. Many obstacles can block the way to a fruitful conversation. Participants can be deliberately or unconsciously anxious about the otherness of the other, they can deliberately or unconsciously avoid the ‘leap of faith into the conversation’, feeling that the learning space is not ‘safe for diversity’. Excluding truth claims in the different worldview positions at stake could hinder or even block the conversation. People could find it hard to (learn) to ‘respectfully disagree’. It could be even the case that some topics (e.g. creation of the world) are not commensurable at all, because of radically different stances of the participants. Regardless, both harmonisation and radicalisation should be avoided, both being undesirable learning outcomes. But the middle way is often much more complex and demanding.

Conclusion

In this article we made a contribution to the ongoing development of SR in its original form as a didactical method for interreligious dialogue. Until now there is, as far as we know, no didactical framework available (except Vaughan 2015) for organising the learning environment for SR in a successful way. We believe that collecting empirical evidence on preconditions, process and learning outcomes of SR in the context of teacher education can help us to create a didactical model for SR which can be transferred to all kinds of learning processes. Our intention was not to create a hermeneutical-theological theory of SR – for instance vis-à-vis comparative theology – but to develop a research setting in which actual human persons with their own religious and non-religious convictions and backgrounds find each other and struggle with each other in the dialogue. Philosophical texts were added to the traditional Abrahamic approach to SR, because there is an awareness that the non-religious position is growing in contemporary society. This can be rather a blessing than a curse for all participants in the dialogue, now in their position as student teachers and later as actual teachers in pluralist societies and schools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Katharina Welling, MA Ed., is a research assistant in religious education at the Faculty of Humanities and Theology at TU Dortmund.
Bert Roebben, Dr of Theol., is professor of religious education at the Faculty of Humanities and Theology at TU Dortmund. He is the 2017 president of the Religious Education Association.

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