

## Article

# Religious Education and Comparative Theology: Creating Common Ground for Intercultural Encounters

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**Abstract:** In this paper, a conversation is initiated about the relationship between religious education (RE) and comparative theology (CT). It is the first time that these are both addressed explicitly in an international academic discourse. The authors are colleagues in a university setting of RE teacher education and are both involved in local RE research programs. Our approach is theological, and our shared interest is the existential lifeworld of children and young people. Firstly, we wish to bring RE and CT into conversation with each other, based on five common characteristics. Secondly, we describe how this conversation can possibly stimulate discussion on new pathways of intercultural encounters in the RE classroom, and this not only from a German (mainly confessional) perspective but also in light of other forms of non-confessional RE. After a (1) contextualization of RE in Germany, the authors describe (2) five central features of contemporary RE, followed by (3) five CT observations, connecting to these features. In (4), the relationship between the two is discussed as common ground for intercultural encounters and as a promising praxis and research field awaiting further development.

**Keywords:** religious education; comparative theology; intercultural education; interreligious learning; RE teacher education; performative religious education



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## 1. Depicting the Context of RE in Germany

Religious education in Germany is, according to the Constitution (Art. 7, § 3), an ordinary school subject, based on the principle of *res mixta*—the distributive responsibility of state and church. The state provides the administrative and organizational framework, whereas the churches and faith communities deliver the content, relying on their central doctrinal convictions. Historically, this led to the situation that the Catholic and the Protestant church were (and still are) the central providers of RE in schools and that, depending on the presence of people from other denominations and faith traditions, other school subjects such as Islamic or Jewish RE may be provided as well. There are large differences in the German federation in the organization of RE, but this does not rule out the fact that in most of the *Länder* (the legislative parts of the federal state), confessional RE is the default position. Schools plan different confessional RE classes according to the presence of pupils in the school population. Countrywide, there are exceptions to the default model of confessional separation, e.g., in the city of Hamburg with its multifaith “RE for all” (in German, *Religionsunterricht für alle*), and in Berlin with its school subject “Life organization, ethics and religious studies” (in German, *Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde*), with classrooms in which pupils meet each other cross-religiously (Ziebertz and Rothgangel 2016).

In the last few decades, however, the confessional RE system has changed intensively, for many reasons that can be explained sociologically. Fewer and fewer children are presenting a baptismal certificate that provides (in the strict sense of the word) access to a particular confessional RE. Family situations are becoming more and more complex, and children are growing up in multifaith families. With migration and mobility, new religious minorities are increasingly participating in school life, which not only affects the

constellation of everyday class groups but also the different forms of mono-confessional RE. Evangelical newcomers from Africa, for instance, reshuffle the content of Protestant RE, Greek Catholic newcomers from Ukraine that of Catholic RE. On top of that, more and more parents are choosing not to have their children receive any RE at all and are opting out. The long-standing separation of confessional groups in the curricular organization of the school can no longer be maintained, which is especially the case in urban areas. Pluralization and secularization, going hand in hand with detraditionalization, change the RE landscape in Germany tremendously. Needless to say, this is also the case in most other countries in Europe (cf. the REDCo-project: [Jackson et al. 2007](#)).

The churches and faith communities are aware of this situation and are responding by creating cooperative partnerships. Thus, the so-called KoKoRU (confessional-cooperative RE) emerged at the end of last century ([Schröder 2022](#)). Both the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany favor (to a greater or lesser extent) this model, based on “sensitivity to differences and awareness of one’s own confession” ([Woppowa 2016](#)). On these grounds, new initiatives are being taken at the political level, as in Lower Saxony, with the option of making the field (Catholic and Protestant) “ecumenical” in the full sense of the word, and at the academic level by expanding the possibilities of a confessional-cooperative subject towards a religion-cooperative subject ([Schweitzer et al. 2022](#); [Woppowa and von Stosch 2020](#); [Woppowa et al. 2020](#)) or by expanding the existing confessional organization based on the principle of internal plurality ([Zonne-Gätjens 2022](#)).

The question is, however, whether these models come too late to meet the renewed religious landscape, especially after the migration crisis in 2015 and its follow-up through many new crises, without even mentioning the war in Ukraine. After all, the plurality of encounter in the classroom is rising noticeably. The religious landscape is in motion, and it is multidimensionally in motion—in a “post-migrant and religious-sensible” way ([Schreiner 2019](#)). From now on, it is best to speak in the plural: a multitude of texts and traditions, of contexts and socializations, of “hybrid” biographies and identities flowing past (and into!) the lives of young people in one and the same classroom ([Bartz and Bartz 2018](#)). Moreover, it is questionable whether a mono-religious confessional anchor point, to which young people can position themselves, is still available. The question is also whether the so-called mono-confessional pupils, e.g., fundamentalist Muslims or evangelical Christians, are as unambiguous in their religious belonging as we often think. It is our contention that RE as an official curricular element in schools can and should contribute to living and learning in the presence of the other—being in dialogue with each other—in order to understand the other and oneself better, to move “closer and closer apart and further and further together” (David T. Hansen), to overcome conflicts and to try out new practices of “togetherness-in-difference” ([Roebben 2019](#), p. 52). It is our contention as well that RE, in its combination with comparative theology, can create a common ground for an intensified intercultural encounter, in which universal existential questions and particular worldview answers can meet peacefully. In what follows, we elaborate on the input of both partners and on their common contribution to the intercultural encounters in the classroom.

## 2. Religious Education: Providing a Solid Language for Existential Questions

After depicting the factual and organizational context of RE in Germany, we now focus on what actually happens in the classroom. There is much evidence that RE—through the whole spectrum, going from mono-confessional to multifaith forms of RE—offers children and young people in German schools a place to raise important existential questions related to their identity development on the one hand and to be confronted with a more or less broad variety of (non)religious answers to these questions on the other. Five components seem to appear substantially in every form of RE didactics: (1) interpersonal learning arrangements, (2) diversity in providing content, (3) empowering critical thinking, (4) a performative learning approach and (5) context-embeddedness of religions and worldviews. We believe that these five elements have become even more relevant in a post-pandemic

vitalization of the field of RE in schools (cf. Roebben 2021, where we highlighted seven dimensions of good RE for the future).

### 2.1. Interpersonal Learning Arrangements

The learning environment is monologic, which means that children and young people are not considered to be representatives for meso- or macro-forms of religious and nonreligious belief systems, but they stand on their own. To a greater or lesser extent, they belong to the religious or nonreligious group to which their parents belong and, moreover, they do so in their own unique way. What they have acquired in terms of worldview knowledge from the home situation, they bring to the school. They speak about their background, about their church, about their Sunday school or Mosque school, about the possible differences in religious backgrounds of their parents and how they relate to that. They negotiate this knowledge in the classroom and test how others relate to it (Roebben and Dommel 2013). No pupil brings up the full tradition of the home situation; for that matter, neither do adults in their conversations with other adults. Children speak micro-logically about what religion does or does not do for them and what they do or not do with religion.

Religious learning, therefore, is and should always be an interpersonal thing: children learn “in the presence of the religious and the non-religious other” (Roebben 2016, pp. 13–18), bringing to the table of learning their own specific religious affiliation. Their learning is and should be dialogic, face-to-face, responsive, and responsible—de facto and in principio (Roebben 2016, pp. 51–55; Zittoun 2014). For the religious learning process, this “response-ability” implies four things. (1) Children bring in their experiential knowledge and should be encouraged to do so. (2) As they grow older, they need to learn to position themselves critically to their homes and if needed to religious influencers, both (neo)liberal and fundamentalist ones. (3) “Interpersonal tensions and emotional disturbance can be seen as an unavoidable consequence of the learning process and of intellectual growth; old truths may need to be given up, often at great cost for the individual and often also to the dissatisfaction of that person’s in-group, who may insist on traditionally held understandings, and who expect conformity” (Johannessen and Skeie 2019, pp. 267–68, with reference to Ger Biesta). (4) RE should be considered an ordinary school subject, in which similar learning processes to other fields occur, in order to make sense in a democratic society.

### 2.2. Diversity in Providing Content

This leads us to the second characteristic of RE in general and German RE in particular. Religious content is provided by the teacher in a multilayered way. The traditional diversification of “learning about religion” and “learning from religion,” which can also be adapted to geographical, musical, sporting, or even mathematical problem-solving, implies that knowledge is communicated by the handbook (*about*), but also through the classroom conversation about the themes provided by the handbook (*from*). People learn religious literacy and religious inquiry through objective content and intersubjective encounters. On top of that, they learn to listen to their own voice (learning *in/through* religion) in the ways in which they need to “redefine and redignify” (Roebben 2016, pp. 17–18) their own subjective religious experience against the background of the knowledge that is newly transmitted through the “about” and “from” dimensions in the classroom.

The three dimensions are necessary elements for a solid learning process. Without objective knowledge (*about*), the RE classroom is reduced to a cafeteria or a talk show on TV. Without inter-worldview encounters (*from*), the classroom event dwindles into a mere information center like a library, an exposition hall, or a web search, and without an emphasis on personal appropriation (*in/through*), religious knowledge remains on the outside, not taken home by pupils as knowledge for life.

### 2.3. Empowering Critical Thinking

Good teaching stimulates the three abovementioned capabilities. It encompasses information, communication, and appropriation. The teacher offers the pupils challenging

hermeneutic materials so that they are provoked to think critically. They are challenged “to follow their own reflective movements” and to respond to the adage *sapere aude* (dare to think) (von Stosch 2021, p. 11). Even in an explicitly confessional approach in a classroom, the pupils need to learn to react plausibly to the offered materials, consistently and coherently. In German, this type of reaction to confessional education is called *konfessorisch*: taking position (Heimbrock 2017), appropriating the traditional elements in one’s own personal journey of faith. The German didactical concepts of *Kindertheologie* and *Jugendtheologie* (children’s and youth theology) support this kind of approach. They rely on the assumption that children and young people are able to raise philosophical and theological questions that differ from adult questions, but are substantially the same (Roebben 2016, pp. 81–97). In this respect, it is our contention that good RE always should look for the most appropriate classroom materials, fitting every age and every dis/ability (Roebben 2012).

#### 2.4. Performative Learning Approach

Religious language is shrinking or at least changing because of a lack of religious socialization in families and communities. The crucial questions in life, however, remain. Religious language is grounded in the substratum of religious experience. Is it shrinking and/or changing as well? And what does this imply for the learning process? These questions are raised in a performative learning approach, highly debated in German RE circles (Roebben and Welling 2021). It all boils down to a more explicit “hands on” way of dealing with the phenomenon of religion through experiential learning.

This way of “learning by doing” is especially important in interreligious learning settings. By being on the road and being a guest in the religious world of the other—or by inviting the other in one’s own religious world as a host—new content can be prepared, tried out, and evaluated, always with an eye on personal appropriation. Content elements can be sacred spaces (visiting churches, mosques, or synagogues during a pilgrimage), rituals (prayer, blessings, healing) and texts (cf. the SpiRiTEx-project: Niedermann 2021; Roebben et al. 2019). The three steps in such a performative learning process are evident. For instance, in working with texts along the lines of the method of “scriptural reasoning” (Welling 2020b), there is always a “discursive introduction,” followed by the “performative experience” of mutually reading each other’s religious texts (including perspective change and perspective broadening) and an evaluation in a “discursive reflection” (cf. Welling 2020a, pp. 313–15, summarized in Roebben and Welling 2021, p. 96). It should be mentioned that the research of Welling was conducted with RE student teachers and not with pupils in primary or secondary classrooms. With regard to spaces and rituals, Marianne Moyaert makes a plea for inter-ritual learning: “Entering the sacred space of another tradition and engaging some of the rituals performed creates this possibility of experiencing both the beauty and wisdom of another tradition. It also opens up the possibility of a deeper understanding of the other tradition, by seeing the interconnection between what is believed and how that is symbolically and ritually enacted” (Moyaert 2018, pp. 56–57; see also Moyaert 2017).

In this approach, learning happens along the way. Here again, the search direction is a central feature: children and young people are allowed to seek answers to the questions they encounter along the way. Doubt is not neglected either. The teacher is expected to have an eye for possible existential questions and for the religious differences that play a role in this respect in the class, even in the most mono-confessional class imaginable. The teacher offers well-chosen, challenging hermeneutically learning impulses and activates his or her students’ religious learning. He or she ensures that students are well prepared and insights collected and reflected upon. From these and previous characteristics of good RE, it becomes clear that the role of the teacher is essential and that high-quality teacher education is a must.

### 2.5. Context-Embeddedness of Religions and Worldviews

It is quite a job for children and young people in these hectic days to unravel their living environment and find reliable information and meaningful orientation for their “life project.” RE can no longer hide itself in an ivory tower, from where it distributes knowledge on religions and worldviews in an academic way. “Many young people are seeking meaning, looking to understand themselves, their community, and open to exploring the spiritual dimension of life. There is a need to listen to the views and opinions of the young people, to understand their experiences of faith and to facilitate them being active agents in their own spiritual development and that of others” (Casson 2019, p. 520). This existential openness and context awareness is often lacking in all sorts of moral education and citizenship education (Bertram-Troost 2021).

In times of global transitions (pandemic, climate crisis, armed conflicts, social injustice, etc.), religious and nonreligious traditions can release “semantic potential” (Jürgen Habermas) for spiritual and moral grounding and for theological and ethical thought processes. They offer ways of starting to talk about important issues and taking away the shyness and the inarticulateness. This is not an easy undertaking: “religious education may be the subject where sociocultural differences are most visible and where the challenges of diversity are put to the test” (Johannessen and Skeie 2019). Because of the fact that contexts are shifting and people are trying to stay personally in tune with them as good as possible, frictions and collisions of meaning can arise between people.

## 3. Comparative Theology: Deep Engagements with Another Tradition

What could be the contribution of comparative theology to peaceful and activating RE learning processes in the classroom? The central distinguishing feature of comparative theology is that it seeks to learn from religious traditions other than one’s own (von Stosch 2012, pp. 149–50; 2021, pp. 10–11). In the new comparative theology movement, which was developed from the eighties of the previous century onwards by Francis X. Clooney, James L. Fredericks, and others, this learning is grounded in a deep engagement with another religious tradition (Clooney 2001; Valkenberg 2022). It can be approached from a confessional or a meta-confessional perspective (Cornille 2019), but in both approaches expertise in more than one religion is cultivated. Comparative theologians within the field of confessional theology do not seek to define their own religious identity by distinguishing themselves from other religions, but by including them. Dialogue with protagonists of other religions and worldviews are their central means of developing their own identities. In this way, comparative theology on the one hand wants to promote an appreciative interaction between religions, but on the other hand it also remains committed to the search for truth. It is theology, and therefore asks about the ultimate reality—the reality that is called God in the monotheistic religions. In order to undertake comparative theology, certain attitudes and methods are needed, which we want to bring into discussion in this section with the five characteristics of RE that we presented in the previous section.

### 3.1. Interpersonal Learning Arrangements Based on Problem-Solving and Empathy

Comparative theology works micro-logically (Clooney 2001, p. 15; Clooney and von Stosch 2018). It cannot look at the world of religions as a whole, nor can it compare religions as a whole. Religions are far too complex for that. Therefore, the comparison cannot apply to religions as a whole, but rather examines concrete theological theories, liturgical forms, and spiritual or moral practices in the lives of human beings. This micro-logical focus gives space for dealing productively with those hybrid identities and negotiated boundaries that challenge us in the classroom today (Brecht and Lockling 2016).

The choice of individual cases, however, is by no means arbitrary. It is based on problems of one’s own theological thinking or one’s own search for meaning. It may thus also be oriented towards the needs and questions of young people. This problem orientation ensures that we really want to learn something from other religions. If we allow an unsolved

problem as the starting point of comparative theology, it is clear that this theological enterprise begins with its own weakness and is dependent on help and cooperation.

The problems of comparative theology can also be cross-religious problems, i.e., they can also work through social problems that affect religious agents just as much as nonreligious agents. At this point, theologians from different religious traditions work together to find the best solutions to problems. In doing so, they question the resources of the different religious traditions for their potential for solutions. The goal is not to find the best religion, but to solve the common problem. This form of comparative theology will therefore succeed particularly well in the cooperation of different theologies, but even otherwise, a cooperative or collaborative form of theology is probably the best form of comparative theology (Körner 2021, p. 180).

Unfortunately, social problems sometimes arise from the religions themselves. At this point, it is clear that comparative theology must have a special interest in getting to grips with such problems and working on them in the dialogue between religions. Indeed, a comparative theology pursued in a cooperative manner is itself, in its implementation, an answer to the occasionally conflictual relationships among religious traditions.

The problem orientation of comparative theology is in danger of reducing the perception of religion to one's own needs. That is why it is important to contrast it with the attitude of *empathy* as a corrective. Religious people sometimes do strange things that can only be understood if one makes a serious hermeneutical effort and is fundamentally prepared to be touched by the practice of religious people. This empathy does not need a prejudice against another religion—a postponement of judgment is enough. If it is paired with loving attention, it will help to gain the patience and creativity to understand religious people.

Empathy, then, tries to open up to the other to such an extent that I allow myself to be touched and affected by them and their religion. This does not mean that I adopt their religion or believe it to be true, but it does mean that I let them and their religious practice approach me without at the same time inwardly distancing myself from it. This can lead to my participating in or observing one or the other religious practice. Of course, one must not make a possibly arising affliction a prerequisite for being able to undertake comparative theology and to enter into interreligious dialogue. It remains ultimately unavailable and cannot be learned by means of a technique. As long as it is not theologically reflected and understood, it also remains contested and confusing in a special way. However, one can expect that the participants in interreligious dialogue will open up to each other and be empathetic to the longings and hopes of the other—even and especially if a spiritual level is reached in the process.

### 3.2. Provision of Content through Different Forms of Learning

Catherine Cornille distinguishes six different forms of learning within CT (Cornille 2019), which can help us to further differentiate what happens when people learn “in the presence of the other,” more specifically, when they are challenged to reposition themselves. First of all, Cornille concedes that it can already be a form of comparative learning if I am strengthened in my own religious orientation through other religions. An *intensification* of faith through similarities across religious boundaries is considered somewhat old-fashioned in CT, because it has long been clear that it is precisely the differences between religions and denominations that need to be worked on theologically. However, we should not forget how beneficial commonalities can be and how much they can have a stabilizing effect, especially in young people's search for orientation. Therefore, intensification in one's own faith and theology is a legitimate form of learning in comparative theology. As a second learning opportunity within comparative theology, Cornille points to the possibility of *reviving* one's own forgotten traditions by getting to know the other religion. Here, it is a matter of discovering something in the other that also existed in me, but which I have forgotten. The confrontation helps me to go back to my tradition and to reinterpret what I already know. A third form of learning illuminated by Cornille is the *reinterpretation* of one's own in the light of the other religious tradition in order to arrive at a recovery.

For example, the Muslim critique of polytheism can avoid a certain carelessness in social trinitarianism and rediscover trinitarian thinking as a defense of monotheism.

The learning opportunities outlined so far should be largely uncontroversial and generally comprehensible. Why should one not be happy about commonalities across religious boundaries, and what difficulty could lie in the other religion becoming an occasion for me to perceive buried strands of my own tradition anew? New interpretations in one's own tradition cannot be overlooked, either, in the course of the developments and interactions of religions throughout history. In comparative theology, these processes of mutual influence are merely raised to a conscious level. In contrast, the three forms of learning that now follow are each challenging in their own way.

Cornille makes it clear that in the context of comparative theology, there are always *appropriations* of traditions. Here, then, it is a matter of a hitherto nonexistent side of one's own religion being newly introduced through the encounter with the other religion or denomination. In other words, it is about new insights, teachings, and practices that are absorbed or taken possession of, e.g., in the course of inculturation processes. This appropriation can be particularly inspiring in the context of religious and intercultural education, because it directly invites people to be enriched by others. In a way, this form of learning is based on admitting to missing something or not having something. It shows how I can learn from others and still remain myself. Even more challenging is the learning form of *rectification*. Cornille is thinking here of the traditional misunderstandings of the religious other, such as those that have poisoned Jewish–Christian dialogue for so long. Her point in introducing this category, then, is that a non-Christian religion like Judaism is allowed to rectify false images of that religion. When Christians sweepingly defame Jews as God-killers, or when Muslims and Jews are accused of worshipping a violent and capricious God, the members of the other religion must be allowed to correct these misperceptions. Of course, even such corrections are anything but trivial, and they require thorough theological reflection. Within comparative theology, however, attempts are made to make this form of learning fruitful for central contents of faith (for example [von Stosch 2018](#)). In this way, it can encourage RE not only to be enriched by others but also to be questioned by them. Allowing oneself to be corrected, acknowledging one's own mistakes, and developing oneself can thus become characteristics of theological learning. Especially when one learns to be challenged to this extent, it is important that it can also be a result of comparative learning to reaffirm one's own position. Here the line between this and classical apologetics is very thin, as Cornille also makes clear in her descriptions of this sixth form of learning. For her, this learning opportunity is not about simply insisting on one's own position, but about a renewed affirmation in the sense that certain aspects of one's own faith become important again, which one did not have in mind before or did not consider important. In her examples, it becomes clear that an element of purification can also be contained in this *reaffirmation*.

### 3.3. Empowering Critical Thinking Needs Vulnerability and Epistemic Humility

Comparative theology takes place in a fundamental attitude of vulnerability ([Moyaert 2014](#), pp. 157–88) in which one is prepared to let go of one's own expectations and be confused. In interreligious encounters, we often only see what we want to see and are used to seeing, but other religions confront us with completely different perspectives on the world and only have a chance to reach us if we allow ourselves to be irritated and challenged by them. Only when we allow our habits of seeing to be shaken and calculate that everything could also be completely different will we be able to understand the grammar of another religion. Precisely because religions are about people's deepest and innermost longings, openness at this point can hurt.

The prerequisite for such vulnerability is an awareness of the limitations of one's own capacity for knowledge. Catherine Cornille speaks here of the need for an attitude of epistemic humility ([Cornille 2008](#), pp. 29–30). For any religious thinking, it is clear that human cognition is limited. Even if human beings believe themselves to be witness

to a divine truth, this testimony is to be distinguished from the witnessed truth. Human testimony is always subject to improvement and human cognition is never at an end, such that any theology still has an infinite amount to be learned.

If vulnerability and humility are not to slip into skepsis, it is important to cultivate a certain trust in understanding at the same time. Theology, by its very name, trusts the logos, reason, and understanding. If God exists, it would be strange if God had given us reason and its basic instinct to understand only out of sheer spite. With all humility and all insight into the limitations of understanding, we should therefore also want to understand through comparative theology and also trust that we can understand. This basic hermeneutical confidence is ultimately also the reason that we ask for truth in the theologies and believe that we can trace it, even if we will never possess it. It is precisely when another religious tradition is approached with empathy, vulnerability, humility, and optimism about knowledge that it is not unlikely that common learning successes will be achieved. At this point, however, it is indispensable to examine the possibilities of connection and problem-solving perspectives found in an instance of a third party.

The third party can be an external perspective from the fields of religious studies, literary studies, or linguistics, or it can draw on other sociological, political science, cultural studies, or religion-critical perspectives. It stands for the ideal community of communication that should be present in the scientific community and exposes the results found to ever-newer forms of scrutiny. Only such exposure to external criticism of all kinds (ethical, scientific, cultural, literary, social, etc.) ensures that comparative theology can be understood as empowering critical thinking.

### *3.4. Performative Learning Approach and the Challenge of Hospitality*

Once a concrete problem or question has been defined, the decisive step in comparative learning is to enter the horizon of another religious tradition, to get to know the problem in the horizon of this foreign tradition, and, if necessary, to reformulate it. This requires serious theological study in the relevant tradition or at least guidance from the theologies of other religions. Here again, the typically cooperative character of comparative theology is evident. Research projects are therefore usually always supervised by responsible representatives from at least two religious traditions. The study of comparative theology also needs serious effort to understand beyond the boundaries of one's own theological tradition. It is not necessary to learn the language of a non-Christian religion like a second mother tongue, but an attempt should be made to immerse oneself in the foreign world of the other religion and to become acquainted with at least a basic knowledge of its grammar before attempting to articulate one's own problem in this new language.

To enable such learning in other religious traditions, something like the cultivation of hospitality is needed. When we expect guests in our home, we clean up and try to make it as comfortable as possible for the guest. We like to say that we want the stranger to feel at home, but nevertheless it remains our home, and we will not change our entire interior just to make it more comfortable for the guest. That means we present ourselves as tidy and accessible, but we remain ourselves. We should approach people and ideas from other religious and cultural traditions in comparative theology in the same way. We should present our own worldview in an accessible and understandable way and make an honest effort to show our own place—even in its limitations and vulnerability. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to the language dimension of hospitality (*hospitalité linguistique*, cf. [Moyaert 2011](#), pp. 89–91)—the pleasure in being linguistically hospitable to the other in one's own house.

According to Cornille, the difference and strangeness of the guest is the real challenge for hospitality ([Cornille 2008](#)). Here, hospitality challenges us to see elements of possible truth in this strangeness, of which the host has no knowledge and no access to understanding. Therefore, hospitality also means that my house becomes different, so that a stranger can be in it as the person who she is in her own house.



However, comparative theology is not only about giving hospitality but also about receiving it. It is therefore about immersing oneself in the world of other religions and benefiting from the hospitality of people of other religions. Only when I go to the foreign country full of humility and empathy and allow myself to be received hospitably and begin to learn from the other religion and culture—simply in the foreign country, without any intention of exploitation, only in the attempt to appreciate the reality of the others—will I also be able to grant hospitality in a comprehensive sense. Through the experience with the stranger, I will be able to learn a great deal that will help me to welcome the stranger and give him/her a chance to be themselves with me. This process of giving and taking, of being host and guest, is anchored in the experience of mutual negotiation, of careful boundary crossing and hybrid identity positioning from both sides. The demarcation line between hosts and guests in the learning process is fluid. It will be interesting to see how this situation will evolve in a world of ongoing pluralization and detraditionalization.

### *3.5. Context-Embeddedness and Dealing with Struggle and Conflict*

The fifth and final methodological step of comparative theology is to incorporate the possibilities of connection found in the other religious and cultural traditions into one's own worldview and to attempt to solve the problem that was defined in the beginning. In doing so, the concerns from the instance of the third party should be considered and integrated. If one does one's own theology not only for oneself but within the framework of a faith community, it would be important in this methodological step to also show how the results found could be profitable for one's own faith community. In any case, it should become understandable in which way one's own theology has been informed through the traditions of other religions.

The aim is to show how one's own theological thinking has been enriched by the confrontation with the otherness of the other, which can be and remain however tenaciously resistant (in German, *das widerständig Fremde*, cf. [Tautz 2007](#), p. 365, following the work of K.E. Nipkow). The other can remain fundamentally strange to me and to my endeavor to welcome him or her. Therefore, the encounter can become a painful struggle or even a conflict. The productive power of interreligious conflicts and possibly also the conflicts through which one's own thinking has been developed should become visible. On the one hand, this should make clear the great value of other religious traditions and how strongly they can enrich or at least challenge us. On the other hand, it should also become clear how one's own existential questions, which were defined at the beginning, have been answered or how they have been or need to be developed further. One should, however, never forget that the goal of the encounter is not harmonization of standpoints, but a better mutual understanding of different positions, positions that can remain tenaciously resistant and incommensurable to one another.

## **4. Religious Education and Comparative Theology: Creating Common Ground for Intercultural Education**

To date, the reciprocal involvement of RE and CT with each other has not been systematically studied. In practice, there have been several attempts to try out this model of interreligious learning, but reflection and empirical evidence on this are still lacking. In the United States, a collection of essays on CT in a campus setting of RE was published ([Brecht and Lockling 2016](#)) and in Germany, the first reflections were collected in a book on CT and RE in primary and secondary education ([Burrichter et al. 2015](#)) and in further separate contributions on the theme (e.g., [Sass 2014](#)). The doctoral research of [Vaughan \(2015\)](#) in the US and that of [Welling](#) in Germany ([Welling 2020b](#)) looked deeper into the didactic possibilities of the method of "scriptural reasoning" as a specific text-based form of CT. In what follows, we want to draw some outlines from our joint reflection up to this point and tentatively indicate how the meeting of both can contribute to a systematically founded and practically relevant "common ground" for intercultural education. It goes without saying that the concrete implementation of this model in the classroom, with its

specific organizational setting (time, place, teaching staff, local context, etc.), will need to be considered carefully and will definitely shape the outlook and the development of the model.

#### 4.1. *Creating Clarity in the Classroom*

There is a greater need than ever in these hectic and polarized times for cooperation and for the cultivation of empathy across borders (learning *from* religions and worldviews). Education can strengthen the spiritual undercurrent present in all religions and worldviews, but it can also ensure that the uniqueness and dignity of the different positions is given a full place in the thinking of children and young people such that they are challenged to think further than their own position and learn in rich diversity to find solutions to difficult existential questions. This otherness and newness can be brought into the learning process through comparative theological elements. How this happens concretely depends on the organizational form of the local RE classroom.

Class groups (even the most mono-denominational ones) are characterized by hybridity. The personal life stories of children and young adults are also marked by mixed experiences and convictions. One can hope that in the RE classroom, clarity is created about the background of these experiences and convictions, that the so-called *Halbwissen* (undefined and vague knowledge) is dismantled, and religious literacy (learning *about* religion) is made available to every learner. Pupils should know also that religion and theology are embedded in systematic and practical frameworks. Mixing is one thing—mixing courageously, responsibly, and supported by reliable criteria is another. In this respect, Cornille's learning forms (see Section 3.2) break open the possible "egology" of an individualistic religious perspective. In most of the six forms of learning she proposes, the prefix "re" is present, which means that each position must be constantly rethought—from the point of view of the other and his or her complex position. The "redefining and redignifying" (see Section 2.2) of one's own journey in and through the interreligious encounter implies hard work: reflective openness, careful study, and empathetic listening.

Such listening also needs time spent in exposing ourselves to different worldviews, cultures, and religions. As comparative theologians spend a lot of time in learning the traditions of other religions, school has to open some space for learning within different religious traditions. Pupils should not only learn religion from the outsider perspective but also should be invited to cross borders and understand how different religions are conceived from an insider perspective. What we propose is at least a learning space for explicit religious and worldview diversity at school, where existentialist (in opposition to essentialist) ways of dealing with transcendence can be explored and discussed, so that young people become the "insiders" of their own moral and spiritual development.

#### 4.2. *Safe Space and Brave Space in the Classroom*

This brings us to the second observation. Navigating between different "insider" perspectives needs intellectual humility. Becoming humble in the face of the concrete other can make us vulnerable. *Safe* space is needed in the classroom to address this fragility. However, the space also needs to be *brave*. Fundamentalist voices (from both sides: hyperreligious and/or hyperliberal) should be allowed to be countered and rebuffed in the classroom. Each person must be called to account for the truthfulness of their own position and to do so authentically in the context of their own home or family situation. This is probably the hardest part in the interreligious dialogue: dealing constructively with issues of hidden and outspoken framing and othering. In this respect, it is important to mention here the contribution of the so-called third party (see Section 3.3), which can help to keep the discourse open, based on other disciplines (for example, ethics, natural sciences, social and/or cultural studies), and can help to prevent the discourse from becoming closed-minded and even aggressive. We believe that transdisciplinary project work is the best solution to create such a brave and safe space. It goes without saying that this implies

important changes in teacher education with relation to future cooperation and exchange of expertise, both on a content and a process level.

The school should be the place par excellence where this learning can take place in an activated and differentiated form. The teacher has an important role to fulfill in actively broadening the horizon with other viewpoints. He or she is the expert in religious literacy and should therefore also, if needed, invite other religious voices to the classroom—in person or virtually. In multifaith settings, he or she must be able to give different positions of pupils in the classroom an informed (!) voice. An activating didactical concept and fitting learning materials are another important issue (see, e.g., material on ethical decision-making at the end of life, [Domsel 2022](#)). Obviously, this approach presupposes developmental psychological differentiation. Small children learn differently from young adults when dealing with the religious background of classmates. One of the issues, e.g., is whether or not primary school children should first be introduced in their own “home” religion (in German, *Beheimatung*) before entering the conversation with others (in German, *Verständigung*) at the secondary school. Research can be helpful here in order to address this issue on a local level and to provide concrete models of action. For example, von Stosch and Caruso speak of an initial approach worked out for a “comparative youth theology” ([von Stosch and Caruso 2017](#), pp. 50–51).

#### 4.3. Deep and Regular Encounters in the Classroom

Our final observation concerns performative learning in the tense field of CT and RE. Short-lived and unsubstantial encounters do not lead to a deeper relationship with the other and with oneself. “Crossing over” ([Moyaert 2018](#), p. 57) to the other in order to better understand oneself requires space and time. The metaphor of the tent (developed by [Moyaert 2013](#), pp. 73–75, and empirically researched by [Welling 2020b](#), p. 261) reveals the necessity of an ongoing and deep-going encounter “at home on the road.” This is because the encounter can be instructive but also difficult, friendly but also combative, a *safe* space but also a *brave* space. On top of that, Welling has found in her research on “scriptural reasoning” (SR) in a teacher-education setting “that the participants become more and more confident, open themselves to their dialogue partners, dismantle contact anxiety and develop empathy during the ‘unfolding’ of the SR-dialogue. In this respect a central issue of the interviews afterwards is ‘dialogue routine’ (*Dialogroutine*) (. . . ), which is, according to the participants, of fundamental value in improving religious communicability (*Sprachfähigkeit*)” ([Welling 2020b](#), summarized in [Roebben and Welling 2021](#), p. 98). Deep encounters and regular encounters are a prerequisite for solid comparative theological learning in RE.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper was an experiment in opening up a conversation between systematic theology and practical theology and to discuss the specific contribution of each in CT and RE for schools and their intercultural challenges in an open but complex world. Especially when existential questions are shaping the lifeworld of young people these days, we believe they have the right to a safe and brave space to flourish as creative human beings and citizens of the future. “The discursive articulation in heterogeneous contexts creates the possibility to become interested for religious issues and then to determine one’s own way to deal with those issues” ([von Stosch 2015](#), p. 284). In our view, intercultural education should include explicitly the religious and/or worldview dimension of this searching process so that every young person can make informed decisions in life. With this paper, which is open for further discussion and inquiry, we opted for more interaction chances between different religious and worldview backgrounds, not only in a (German) confessional RE setting but also in multifaith RE settings worldwide. The more the classroom is opened up for dialogue, the more pupils (and their teachers!) will be challenged to become dialogue partners. Such a cultivated impact of religious discourse in school is the public duty of a

democratic society and a “gift to the child” (John Hull)—in the long run and hopefully to every child.

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