

Topic

[1] Contemporary Europe is characterized not only by religious and cultural diversity –which has increased even further as a result of rising numbers of immigration from primarily Muslim countries in recent years–, but also by a breaching with tradition in the sense of a turn away from Christianity by those members of society whose roots lie in Europe.

Despite considerable efforts, handling this diversity is not always productive and in fact tends to result in overstraining and prejudices that frequently culminate in power asymmetries, xenophobia and discrimination of minorities. The individual it seems, is overwhelmed in his/her identity search by the variety of opportunities and the hitherto unfamiliar influences. Correspondingly, it is not seldom that the definition of one's own identity is derived from a differentiation to the "strange other" instead of a productive confrontation with the "new other".

Only the one who deliberately seeks confrontation and discussion with the (religious) other has a chance to get to know him/her along with his/her religion and traditions, while simultaneously granting insight into one's own perspective. This is not about giving up one's own position. Rather, taking perspective in the face of the religious other, allows for a critical articulation, definition and reflection thereof. It is through this mutual respectful confrontation only, that a (religious) identity shaped by tolerance can be formed, one that empowers to resist tensions and grant others participation in one's position without appropriation, while at the same time allowing oneself to get to know the other without adapting him/her to one's own position.

[2] Providing educational support for the development of such a stable personal identity (in German: *Bildung*) is perhaps one of the biggest societal challenges of our time. Given the essential role of religion in this process, religious education has a fundamental responsibility to create *room for encounter* and *time for reflection* on one's own position. The present research project ties into this responsibility by investigating the potential of the pilgrimage to support the construction of a stable religious identity. Many generations of adherents to the Abrahamic religions make use of the peacebuilding capacity of the religious journey to support in their search for God. However today pilgrimage is no longer solely religiously motivated. People seem to be in search of "inner peace", trying to deal with existential questions of life, deliberately detaching themselves from the fast-paced everyday life to define and reflect upon their own place in the world.

[3] In this, they allow themselves to be touched by sacred spaces, not seldom finding their individual access to God on the way or discovering and redefining an existing belief in a new way. Founded in the shared tradition of pilgrimage, an encounter between people of different religious or ideological origin on such a journey is likely. The interplay of mindfully experienced solidarity between pilgrims and the conscious choice to experience temporary solitude, creates the framework for a possible confrontation with sacred spaces, texts and rituals as well as one's own position and attitude towards these religious sources, which can be further deepened and defined through the interaction among pilgrims. In an extraordinary interaction between the pedagogy of pilgrimage with sacred space pedagogy, the tension between the appeal of being on a journey and the attraction of sacred space becomes apparent accordingly. Furthermore, it brings to the fore a theology that could be defined as spiritual theology. In light of rising religious pluralism, the question of the possibility of interreligious pilgrim paths is highly relevant, for such a path could allow explicit space for the deliberate confrontation and dialogue with other religions in general and the religious other in particular.

Research Question and Methodology

In the course of a pilot project, the following research questions will be investigated:

What potential does the encounter with sacred spaces, texts and rituals offer in the context of a pilgrimage?

How do encounters and exchanges between pilgrims influence the identity search process of the individual?

How can the identity-forming potential of pilgrimage be used fruitfully in the context of religious education?

To what extent is an interreligious implementation conceivable?

Data will be taken from a qualitative empirical study, that can be placed within the tradition of ethnographic field research. To this end, I will accompany a group of theology and RE students from Bonn and Dortmund (G), Dublin (IRL), Riga (LV) and Tielt (B) on a pilgrimage in Flanders (Belgium) in May 2018. To provide further linking data on the possibility of an interreligious implementation, I am planning to attend an additional pilgrimage in Cologne (G) that is designed as an interreligious project. In addition to qualitative observation sheets, semi-structured guideline interviews are used as survey instruments. The pilot project provides the basis for a Post-Doc-project that is scheduled to start in 2019.

Core references

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Innovating the field of religious education

This research searches for new ways to meet the aforementioned societal challenges in a productive manner. By reflecting the tradition of pilgrimage in the mirror of present time, it offers opportunities to make use of pilgrims' individual motivations as part of religious education. Taking advantage of the interplay between the pedagogy of pilgrimage, the pedagogy of sacred space and encounter-oriented, interreligious learning, religious education can thereby contribute to building a basis for peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions. In this way, this research project aims to unravel how the *source of pilgrimage* can be used as a *resource for religious education*, the fruitfulness of which is imperative particularly for the training of prospective teachers of religion.

Status of research at the time of the proposal

I am amid the preparations for the pilot project, which includes the theoretical research into the topic as well as the development of guidelines for interviews and observation sheets. At the conference I will be able to give more details.