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# Empirical research: Challenges and impulses for Islamic religious education

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## ABSTRACT

The following article describes how empirical research can give new impulses to Islamic religious education. These impulses could lead to a reconciliation of the Islamic religious heritage with the fast-changing reality of Muslims in non-Muslim countries and societies. Due to the presence of Muslim children in public schools and the urgent question of their religious education, as an academic discipline, Islamic religious pedagogy (Islamische Religionspädagogik) has acquired a pioneering role among the various Islamic theological disciplines. On a scientific level, it has already taken its first steps in the scientific landscape in Germany and Austria and has established diverse references to modern science. Islamic religious pedagogy, as a young scientific discipline, necessarily requires empirical research to provide sound foundations for the quality of Islamic religious education and for a better understanding of religious educational processes. This calls for a dialogue between empirical educational research and theology and cannot be achieved based on purely theoretical assumptions.

## KEYWORDS

Islamic religious pedagogy; Islamic religious education; empirical research; Muslim children and youth; relationship to God; religion; religious concepts of children and adolescence; Germany; Austria

## 1. Introduction

In the following, the development of Islamic religious pedagogy as a scientific discipline is presented, based on empirical research into the realities of the Muslim lives of children and adolescents. At the same time, it is domiciled authentically and reflected in the diversity of its own religious tradition.<sup>1</sup>

It will be shown that empirical analyses in conversation with theology provide impulses to rethink theological and pedagogical concepts in a reality-related way.

The conclusion of the article will show that empirical research on religious education opens up a variety of new paths. Empirical research in the field of religious education does not focus on content or theological agendas and objectives, but rather, on the reality of the lives of children and adolescents.

## 2. Development of Islamic religious education as a scientific discipline in Germany and Austria

In Germany and Austria, Islamic religious pedagogy established itself as an academic discipline before Islamic theology at universities and colleges of education. The development and academization of Islamic religious pedagogy in Germany is closely interwoven with the history of migration, especially with the recruitment of guest workers from Turkey (cf. in detail Ulfat 2017a, 343-72). In Austria, Islam has a special status, as in 1908 Bosnia-Herzegovina joined the Austrian territory, and

with that more than 600,000 Muslims lived in the Danube Monarchy. Since 1912, Islam has held a legally recognised status in Austria.

In Germany, for example, North Rhine-Westphalia was the first federal state to introduce the pilot project 'Islamic Instruction in German Language' in schools in 1999. In Austria, Islamic religious education began in public schools as early as 1982/83.

In Germany, religious education is regulated by the German Constitution. According to Article 7, paragraph 3, sentence 1 of the German Constitution,<sup>2</sup> religious education is a mandatory subject in public schools. Accordingly, religion is a subject which is on equal footing with other subjects. The achievements attained in this subject are thus just as relevant for moving up a grade as in other subjects. The state must ensure that the material and personnel requirements are met and bear the costs.

According to Article 7, paragraph 3, sentence 2 of the German Constitution religious education is given 'without prejudice to state supervisory law in accordance with the principles of the religious communities' (Oebbecke 2010, 56). This means that religious education in most federal states of Germany is denominational. In Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg, there are other regulations.

Religious education should be 'given in confessional positivity and dependence', i.e. it should aim at 'enabling the pupils to practice, to perform, to live in and out of their religion. Such teaching cannot be neutral towards the respective religious and world-views. Rather, it must take the religious commitment as its basis and convey it correctly. It demands identification' (Oebbecke 2010, 56-7).

Religious *instruction* provides knowledge about the answers that religions and world views give to different fundamental questions without commenting on their correctness. Religious *education*, on the other hand, can go a step further and comment on the correctness of answers from the perspective of believers. Denominational religious education may convey one's own religion as assumedly correct, but is not a rigid or methodically fixed education (cf. Oebbecke 2010, 58-9).

Thus, in Germany there is appropriate religious education for different denominations and religions: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Orthodox, Alevi, and others. These lessons are often open to people of other faiths or atheists.

However, there are problems with Islamic religious education, because it is unclear which religious communities the state can or must cooperate with. Religious organisations must fulfil legal criteria in order to be politically accepted as a religious community (cf. Oebbecke 2010, 60).

Returning to Islamic religious pedagogy, since the beginning of 2004, professorships in Islamic religious pedagogy have been established at various universities in Germany. In Austria, or more precisely in Vienna, the IRPA (Islamic Religious Education Academy) was founded in 1998, which initially trained teachers of religious education in cooperation with Azhar University in Cairo. As part of the Bologna Process, IRPA has been offering a bachelor's degree since 2007, and cooperates with the Church University of Education in Krems. The Master's programme Islamic religious pedagogy was also established at the University of Vienna in 2006/07, and students must complete this period of study in order to become high school teachers. Since 2013/14, the University of Innsbruck has offered the bachelor program Islamic religious pedagogy.

Islamic theology, on the other hand, was established a few years later. In Germany, institutions and centres for Islamic theology were founded at five German universities in 2011 on the basis of recommendations by the German Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat). Since then, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research has been funding such institutions and centres in Tuebingen, Frankfurt (with Gießen), Muenster, Osnabrueck and Erlangen-Nuremberg and recently in Berlin and Paderborn. In Austria, the Institute for Islamic-theological studies was established in 2017 at the University of Vienna. An Institute of Islamic theology and Religious pedagogy was been established in Innsbruck, also in 2017.

Islamic religious pedagogy thus had a pioneering role in the German and Austrian university landscape, in which role it established links with the academic world and modern science (cf. Ulfat 2017a). It does not see itself as a 'science of scholastic mediation in the service of established theology' because it 'pursues its own form of theological expertise', and it does not see itself either as a 'variation of Christian religious pedagogy' (Behr 2010, 2).

### 3. Challenges for Islamic religious education

At the university level, Islamic religious pedagogy is now facing the challenge of profiling itself in the areas of systematic-theoretical religious educational research, historical religious educational research, evaluative religious educational research, international-comparative religious educational research and empirical religious educational research (Schweitzer 2017, 112-24). All these educational research approaches are indispensable for the development of Islamic religious pedagogy as a scientific discipline.

In order not to go beyond its scope, this article focuses on empirical research in the field of religious education in schools, working out which new impulses such research can provide for the teaching and the didactic of the subject. This area of religious education is firmly called 'empirical research on religious education' (Emprische Religionspädagogik) which has established itself as a direction of religious education in the Christian field for approximately twenty-five years in Germany and Austria. According to Bernd Schröder, interest in empirical religious education has risen sharply over the last fifty-five years, especially in the field of religious education. On the one hand, according to Schröder, this is due to the empirical turn in pedagogy, which has developed from a rather theoretically based educational science (Erziehungswissenschaft) to an empirical educational science (Bildungswissenschaft). On the other hand, it is also due to the 'content-related and methodological differentiation' of the religious education subjects themselves (Schröder 2014, 95).

However, it must be noted that in the field of Christian religious pedagogy the demand for an 'empirical turn' had already been formulated by Klaus Wegenast in the late 1960s (cf. Wegenast 1968, 111-25). According to Schröder, this demand only really got off the ground with the findings of the PISA studies<sup>3</sup> and the educational policy demands in their wake. This was the case in all subjects (cf. Schröder 2014, 95). In the field of Islamic religious pedagogy, this development is still in its infancy.

Empirical research is thus becoming a constitutive part of religious education in Germany and Austria. The range of empirical research on religious education is now very large. Empirical fields of research include, for example, the religiosity of children and adolescents, religious education and its effectiveness, teachers of religious education and their subjective theories, orientations, etc., inter-religious learning processes in different learning environments, from daycare to adult education, analysis of books for religious education, religious socialisation processes in formal and non-formal settings, and many more areas of inquiry.

Islamic religious pedagogy, especially as a young discipline, necessarily requires empirical research on religious education in order to 1. analyse the religiously plural world of children and adolescents, 2. to understand religious processes of education and appropriation of children and adolescents didactically and 3. to provide empirical foundations for quality religious education. This means that religious education must meet the pedagogical and professional standards that are set for general education. The goals of Islamic religious education are oriented towards the self-development of the human being in the sense that an individual can develop a justified and responsible standpoint with regards to questions of world view and faith. In addition, the results of empirical research can be used to bring together theology and practice in order to accompany religious educational processes in a pedagogical and theological responsible manner, and to offer opportunities for broadening horizons. In accordance with constructivist didactics, the principles presented here assume that children and adolescents are 'productively reality-processing subjects' (Hurrelmann and Quenzel 2016, 94) who arrive at independent interpretations and individual constructions of reality.

Admittedly, this work refers to developments in Germany and Austria. For non-continental teachers and academics, who probably might not be familiar with many authors in the reference list, I would like to mention the empirical work of Abdullah Sahin at Warwick University, who has developed and used the Sahin-Francis scale for establishing the level of Muslim religiosity. Based on empirical research, Sahin engages with the philosophical, theological, and cultural dynamics that inform Muslim educational thought and practice (cf. Sahin 2013).

#### 4. The contribution of empirical research in religious education as a source of inspiration for Islamic religious pedagogy

Empirical research on Muslim children and adolescents exists in Germany and Austria from different research perspectives. On the one hand, there are research projects from a sociological perspective, and on the other, there are research projects from a decidedly Islamic-religious pedagogical perspective. Both perspectives use empirical social research methods.

In the following, the empirical research project from the author herself is presented (cf. Ulfat 2017a), which has provided impulses for Islamic religious education. She has surveyed the relationships of Muslim children to God. In this work it could be reconstructed that Muslim children at the age of about ten years already have a broad spectrum of different relations to God, ranging from a very personal relation to God to a strong relation to tradition, to a lack of relation to both factors.

The relationship to God is an 'emotional-motivational' dimension of 'faith in God', which the psychologist of religion, Bernhard Grom, distinguishes from the 'cognitive' dimension of 'faith in God' (Grom 2000, 115). Similar to Ana-Maria Rizzuto (cf. Rizzuto 1979) and Fritz Oser (cf. Oser 1993), Grom understands the relationship to God as characterised by experience.

Especially for religious education, the emotional dimension of faith in God is of particular relevance, since the emotional components have a decisive influence on religiosity (cf. Hanisch 1996, 94–100) and (cf. Eckerle 2008, 57–69). It can be assumed that this emotional dimension is the guiding principle for children and adolescents. While there are already a number of empirical studies in the field of cognitive development of the image of God, the examination of the state of research makes it clear that 'religious development must be examined more intensively than before from an emotional perspective' (Naurath 2014, 29).

The question arises, as to how this emotional dimension can be surveyed verbally. When children are asked directly about God, they first of all verbalise their propositional knowledge about God. In the best case, such an approach covers only the cognitive dimension of faith in God and, in the worst case, exclusively represents the propositional knowledge of the children, from which no conclusions can be drawn regarding its relevance in their everyday life. The research project presented here has therefore relied on the concept of *implicit knowledge*, which is based on the knowledge-sociological model of Karl Mannheim. Mannheim postulates that although the relationship to God is an individual phenomenon, it arises in a socially shared practice that he calls 'conjunctive space of experience'<sup>4</sup> (cf. Mannheim 1980, 214 and 296). This social practice is an 'atheoretical knowledge' that a person simply has without having to explain it in terms of 'everyday theory' (Nohl 2012, 4). The relationship to God is therefore to be sought in the atheoretical knowledge of the children, which guides their actions, i.e. is implicit and is expressed in their own biographical narratives.

The relationship to God embedded in the atheoretical knowledge of children is further modified by their 'individual systems of relevance' (Nestler 2000, 151). The atheoretical knowledge of children does not merge in the conjunctive space of experience but is subjectivised by the children through their individual relevance systems. Therefore, although their emotional relationship to God is based on their conjunctive space of experience, it is to be regarded as an independent entity.

The research presented here worked with the documentary method as developed by Ralf Bohnsack with regard to Mannheim (cf. Bohnsack 2009, 319-31). This method makes it possible to reconstruct the atheoretical knowledge in the sense of Mannheim. According to Fritz Schütze, it can be found in narrations about experiences (Schütze 1976, 159-269). Therefore, the narrative interview with children was chosen as the survey method and the documentary method as the evaluation method. Decisive for the design of the interview impulse (cf. in depth Ulfat 2018) and the conduct of the interviews, was to consistently avoid direct questions about God or other religious propositional knowledge in order to leave the children space to thematise God and/or their own religious interpretive patterns according to their individual relevance, or not, as the case may be.

On the basis of comparative analyses and theoretical abstraction, the following ideal types could be reconstructed in the sense of Max Weber:

***Type A: self-positioning to God in the modus of a personal relationship***

This type is characterised by the fact that God, as a counterpart, is at the centre of one's own faith. The way in which children of this type speak about God shows a biographical experience based on an emotional relationship to God. God's existence is not questioned (cf. Ulfat 2017b, 120ff.).

***Type B: self-positioning to God in the modus of an orientation towards morality and tradition***

This type is characterised by the fact that the relationship to God fades into the background and the observance of commandments, announcements of prayers and the dichotomous division of actions as permitted and forbidden, form the core of their own faith. God is assigned the role of the creator of a reward-punishment system, and the relationship to him is characterised as functional and goal-oriented. The way of speaking from and about God is often shown as speaking according to social expectations (cf. Ulfat 2017b, 168ff.).

***Type C: self-positioning in a framework of immanent dimensions in the mode of an emotional distance to God***

The children of this type are characterised by a widespread lack of transcendent references. Their attitudes focus on immanent factors such as interpersonal relationships. God is located in the narrations rather in the area of fantasy. Transcendental phenomena such as death are interpreted exclusively as immanent (cf. Ulfat 2017b, 207ff.).

**5. Theology and empirical research in conversation**

Through the dialogue between theology and empiricism, the presented study can provide indications of how young Muslims can be prepared for a life in a religiously plural society, in which the individual relationship to God and the reflexivity of one's own religion is a crucial precondition for feeling at home in both religious and secular worlds.

The material shows that in the orientations of the children, theological fields of tension become visible, such as those between the omnipotence of God and the free will of human beings, between faith and reason, between religion and religiosity and other such fields. On a theological level, the interview material can show that the expressions of the children of the different types reflect different facets of the Islamic schools of thought such as those of the Mu'tazila, the Aš'ariya and the Māturīdiya. Thus, the various references to God that are shown in the children's narrations can be tied to the heritage of the narratives of God inherited from the different schools of thought (cf. Ulfat 2017b, 281–293). The type of personalised self-relation (Type A) most closely reflects the constructions of God of the mu'tazilitic school of thought, the type of moralised and tradition-oriented self-relation (Type B) most closely reflects the aš'aritic school of thought, although it also comes to overlaps. This means that basic theological questions can be found in the interviews with 10-year-old children. On the other hand, the type of self-relation which is distanced to God (Type C) does not reflect any facets of Islamic schools of thought, since God is not considered a real presence anyway.

Muslim religious pedagogues emphasise that 'the so-called life-worldly reference of religious education [...] belongs as much to the didactically justified paradigm, as its connection to the normative system of the interpretation of world and humankind' (Behr 2010, 4) and that in Islamic religious education, student orientation takes precedence over 'object orientation' (Behr 2010, 9, cf. also Ucar 2010 and Khorchide 2010). This means that references relevant to everyday life play an essential role in teaching. The situations in which the children find themselves raises theological questions that have to be answered anew today under the conditions of late modernity. Therefore, the correlation between Islamic Theology and the lifeworld is fundamental for religious education.

In order to facilitate a moderation between religion as a human experience and the religious tradition, it is necessary to grasp the religious interpretation of the world by human beings, which is accessible to empirical research, and thus to relate theology with the contemporary world of children and youth. Therefore, it is particularly important to place the empirical-analytical paradigm in the foreground of Islamic religious pedagogy, in order to take into account the life-world orientation function of religious education. In this way religious education processes can be initiated and accompanied by a reflective didactic.

Research is not about contrasting practice (lifeworld) and theory (theology) in a confrontational way, but rather about 'mediation processes' (Ziebertz 2000, 31) between 'tradition' and 'situation' (Behr 2016). From an Islamic perspective, such mediation processes run in two directions: as an interpretation of the present situation from the point of view of tradition, i.e. from the Qur'an and Sunnah, and conversely as an interpretation of tradition from the perspective of the present situation.

## 6. New impulses for the didactics of Islamic religious education

Against the background of the results of the study on the relationships of Muslim children to God, the following theological-pedagogical theses can be formulated:

It should be noted that these suggestions are not intended to represent imperatives but were obtained through an intensive research process through the interpretation of interview material.

### *Developing a culture of 'religious narrativity'*

- Islamic religious education should be encouraged to develop an explicit *culture of religious narrativity* and a *didactic of narration in the plural*, i.e. the variety and diversity of Islamic narratives.
- Islamic religious education should be encouraged to offer narrative and performative forms of learning to foster religious expression and speaking about oneself.
- Islamic religious education should foster multidimensional perceptions of reality and the ability to change perspectives by introducing a variety of religious narrations and practising an alternation between religious speech and speaking about one's own religion.

### *Feeling at home in secularism*

- Islamic religious education should be encouraged to develop a theory with which students who are far from religion and God can be challenged from a religious perspective, not in a moralising way but through offers of narratives.
- Islamic religious education should be encouraged to promote a practice of feeling at home or practice of belonging beyond national belonging, i.e. to constitute a spiritual, non-national foundation of religion.
- Islamic religious education should be encouraged to offer forms of feeling at home in secularism. These forms need to be both cognitive and emotional in order to enable knowledge, behaviour and also experience.

### *Differentiated learning paths and forms of experience*

- Islamic religious education should be able to switch between discursive and normative approaches, inductive and deductive learning paths, as well as experience-related and theology-related religious education (cf. Behr 2008, 36).
- Islamic religious education should offer habitualizing, reflective, as well as experiential and life-related forms of experience in order to make religion accessible at different levels.



- Islamic religious education should be understanding-oriented. Although the understanding dimension is necessarily dependent on information, the quality of information takes precedence over the quantity.

### *Change of paradigm*

- Islamic religious education should undergo a ‘paradigm shift’ (Behr 2012, 33), by shifting from the text to the mental, from the utopian to the pragmatic, from the collective to the subject, from the community to the social and from the traditional to the situational (cf. Behr 2016).
- Islamic religious education should carry out an ‘anthropological turn’ (Behr 2016) by placing subject-autonomy in the foreground (cf. Ulfat 2017b, 316ff.).

## 7. Conclusions

The study presented here shows that Muslim children and adolescents have a broad spectrum of religious beliefs, relations to God, and self-images. As a result of empirical research, there is a valid claim to the idea that to believe religious education teaches something like systematic theology at a child-friendly level, completely bypasses and ignores the diversity of the reality of child’s and adolescent’s life. However, the claim that Islamic religious education advocates is to reach the children as human beings in their everyday lives and in their different religious and cultural references. A life-world orientation of Islamic religious education would enable an individual, reflective but also tradition-based relationship to God and one’s own faith in a modern, secular world. Merely using mediation didactics for the teaching of religious contents completely misses these goals, since it builds a static stock of propositional knowledge that leaves out the inner attitude and reality of life of children and adolescents.

From this perspective, such a concept of Islamic religious education at school is indispensable in order to demonstrate the diversity of religious narratives that exist in the Islamic tradition, to reformulate it for the students according to their time and their situation and to overcome narrow-minded and dichotomising narratives.

With this brief overview it becomes clear that empirically-based religious education research in the field of Islamic religious education and pedagogy has a decisive relevance. Only through this research do the individual lifestyles of the Muslims and their self-design processes move into the field of view.

Not least for this reason, from an Islamic perspective, there is still a great need for empirical research in numerous areas of religious education, especially in the area of formal and informal educational processes in non-formal settings (cf. Ulfat 2019).

What does *Challenges and Impulses for Islamic religious education* mean in this context? It means accepting and understanding empiricism and empirical research as a basis and challenge for the subject rather than engaging in an explicit theological programmatic approach. The methodically assured view of the lifeworld of Muslim children and adolescents must be taken as a challenge to orient religious education goals and objectives to this lifeworld. This will enable children and adolescents to engage themselves as spiritually oriented Muslims in an open manner in a globalised world, in which they feel a sense of belonging.

## Notes

1. In the following, Islamic religious pedagogy designates the university subject “Islamische Religionspädagogik”, and Islamic religious education designates the school subject “Islamischer Religionsunterricht”.
2. Online: <https://www.bundestag.de/grundgesetz>.
3. The PISA studies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are international school performance surveys which have been conducted every three years since 2000 in most OECD member



states, with the aim of measuring the knowledge and skills of fifteen-year-olds relevant to their daily and professional lives.

4. By 'conjunctive space of experience', Mannheim means social spaces in which similar experiences are made. In such a social space, the members can understand each other directly because they share common experiences. As soon as there is no 'conjunctive experience space', and one wants to share one's own 'conjunctive experience' with those who do not share it, one must theoretically explain the meaning of the action.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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