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Dialogical Practice in Urban Spaces

Comments from a Sociological Perspective

As a matter of course it is hard to do justice to a multiyear project such as ReDi in a short comment like this. I would like to appreciate at the very beginning that the contributions of this volume are pioneering as an endeavour of a comparative empirical analysis of interfaith activism in education and the urban sphere. As I was asked to focus on the strand of urban research and since I will not be able to dive into all the exciting empirical observations anyway, I decided to take a bird's eye perspective on some of the most important findings and comparative conclusions (part 1), relate it to scholarly debates in some neighbouring fields (part 2) and reflect on promising trails for further research emerging from the results of this volume (part 3).

1. Important findings and comparative conclusions

From the viewpoint of sociology I would like to highlight three aspects of the ReDi research, namely the decision for an open-ended empirical approach to interreligious activism (i), the attempt to systematise the variety of interreligious exchange through a model of characteristic tensions (ii) and its focus on the interplay of interreligious 'dialogue' with other spheres of society, such as politics and education (iii).

Critical interfaith studies

As underlined in the introduction, 'the participating researchers in this project agreed on an open, non-normative conception of (interreligious) dialogue' (p. 10). From a sociological perspective I would like to strongly second this claim as well as the observation of a widespread euphemistic use of the term 'dialogue' in scholarly and political debates. If 'dialogue' is an axiom rather than a unit of analysis we have left the field of empirical inquiry and entered a discussion of practical philosophy. This, however, leaves us with the challenge to determine and operationalise 'dialogue' as a unit of analysis. The authors of this study go for a discursive approach using the term 'as a heuristic category to explore the various ways in which it has been employed and interpreted (in words and actions) by participants in the different research locations' (ibid). While such an emic orientation may help to prevent both undue limitations and artefacts, it abets a certain fuzziness of a central category of the study and gives rise to a number of questions: Does 'dialogue' denote a specific measure or format of interreligious activism or is it more of an umbrella term? In the latter case, where is the difference between interreligious 'dialogue' and 'praxis' on the one hand and 'dia-

logue' and 'encounter' on the other? Struggling with the same kind of challenge in my own work, I decided to refer to 'interreligious activities' as organised forms of interreligious encounter which are based on a programmatic notion of religious difference. Under this definition 'dialogues' would be one among various formats highlighting the cognitive and theological dimension of interreligious exchange whereas other formats (for example peace prayers and neighbourhood meetings) put an emphasis on religious and non-religious practice (Nagel, 2016, pp. 207–212). At the same time, this narrower notion will obviously exclude all kinds of spontaneous and implicit sorts of encounter.

Comparative coordinate system

Given the broad definition, I particularly liked the comparative attempt to characterise interreligious 'dialogues' by a set of polar distinctions, such as 'harmonious and confrontational', 'face-to-face and side-by-side', 'dialogue-from-above and dialogue-from-below' and 'organised and spontaneous' (p. 285). In a further step these analytical distinctions could be developed into a typological scheme covering the variety of interreligious approaches in the various localities. This would also support the interesting general observation of 'a shift of interest in the interreligious scene, [...] from the theological implications of religious plurality to its societal implications, from a minority curiosity about different religious customs to a public concern.' (ibid). Based on the envisaged contextual case study approach it would be desirable to learn more on the causal mechanisms between single dimensions (for example 'the more organised and from-above, the more side-by-side and the less theological') and other conditions rooted in the respective urban or national context.

Interfaith governance

Almost all case studies point to an entanglement of interreligious activities with local, regional or national efforts of diversity governance. This is most obvious in the notion of 'dialogues from above' implying that 'dialogues are initiated or supported by government institutions' for example through financial support or administrative assistance (p. 283). As a potential explanation of the involvement of administrative and political actors it is noted that 'inter religious dialogue is viewed as a tool, if not a panacea, for the cure of society's ills.' (p. 285). These observations of interfaith activism as part of an endeavour to moderate and regulate religious and cultural diversity resonate well with debates on interfaith governance which have emerged in the sociology of religion. Drawing from an analysis of public authorities cooperating with regional interfaith platforms in Spain and France, Grieria and Forteza concluded that administrative actors made use of interreligious initiatives in order to compensate for their own religious illiteracy (Grieria & Forteza, 2011, pp. 124–125). Likewise, Dick and Nagel (2016) found that urban politicians and administrators would take part in inter-

religious initiatives to reach out to migrant communities which otherwise would not be accessible. As a matter of fact, the utilisation of interfaith activism as a governance instrument raises a couple of normative as well as empirical questions. Regarding the normative dimension of interfaith governance the authors of this volume take a rather sceptical stance and highlight the ‘burden of expectation’ (p. 285) and the ‘fear of being hijacked’ by public controversies (p. 284). In a similar vein, Dick and Nagel have pointed to the challenges of oligarchisation and exclusion of ‘doubtful’ religious actors, while others have emphasised the positive effects of empowerment and a more efficient cooperative style of problem solving (Klinkhammer, Frese, Satilmis & Seibert, 2011, p. 24). Regarding the empirical dimension of interfaith governance I would like to underline the interesting observation in this volume that public-private collaboration may change the very modalities of interreligious communication for example into a ‘faith-based diplomacy’ which entails a clear-cut notion of religious constituency and representation. For further research the contributions in this volume help to contour an important desideratum of the debate on interfaith governance, that is, the systematic inclusion of a multilevel model of diversity governance. Hence, it seems crucial for the purpose of a contextual comparative analysis to disentangle the various levels of interfaith activism and governance (neighbourhood, city, region, nation, international sphere) and to analyse their respective relationships. This perspective might translate into research questions, such as: To what extent and in which ways does urban interfaith governance rely on national regimes of state-church relations? Which formal competences and what informal capacity do municipal or local administrators have to accommodate religious diversity and to become active in inter-religious activities? And: which roles do state representatives (not) play on different levels of interfaith activism?

2. Other strands of discussion

The introduction of this volume locates the case studies in scholarly debates on inter-religious dialogue as well as religious pluralisation and secularisation in modern societies and addresses the normative notion of ‘dialogue’ in theology and education studies as a major conceptual challenge. While I understand that putting the perspectives of dialogical praxis and dialogical theology into conversation is a central objective of the ReDi project, I would like to point to a couple of neighbouring debates in the field of urban studies which might be helpful to further contextualise the empirical evidence presented here.

In *urban sociology* cities have long been treated as strongholds of secularism. In his famous essay on the mentality of the metropolises (‘Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben’) Georg Simmel argued that the inherent rationality of city life left no room for spontaneity and spirituality (Simmel 2014 [1903], 9). Likewise, the famous Chicago School, despite their interpretative approach and focus on symbolic interaction, hardly addressed religious phenomena, a shortcoming which more recent

research in urban sociology sallied out to cure (Livezey, 2000). The case studies in this volume clearly show that Simmel's considerations do not hold for metropolitan areas of our time. Instead, they point to interreligious dialogues as a genuine and public manifestation of religion in the urban sphere. Contrary to Simmel's suggestion, modern cities and interreligious and intercultural dialogue seem to need one another: interreligious encounter depends on the city as a space of religious diversity and densification and the cities depend on interreligious dialogue as a platform for civic participation and fostering community cohesion.

Dialogue and participation have also become prominent issues in *urban planning and human geography*. Struggling with the question how to organise postmodern superdiverse metropolises, scholars of urban planning have argued for a paradigm of planning 'for and with diversity' and emphasised the need for collaborative and bottom-up planning approaches (Feinstein 2005). In doing so, they acknowledged that religious groups might act as brokers between municipal stakeholders and urban immigrant communities and between potentially conflicting ethno-cultural or religious groups (Dinham, Furbey & Lowndes, 2009, p. 6). Likewise, in human geography a strand of research has emerged around the theme of 'postsecular cities', working with the assumption that 'religion, faith communities and spiritual values have returned to the centre of public life [...]. Rapidly diversifying urban locations are the best places to witness the emergence of new spaces in which religions and spiritual traditions are creating new alliances but also bifurcations with secular sectors' (Beaumont & Baker, 2011, p. 1). In both debates the analysis of *interreligious* activism as a form of urban participation or an instance of religious revitalisation in the urban public is still a desideratum.

Last, but not least, *social and cultural anthropologists* have given attention to the public presence of religion in metropolises around the globe. In contrast to the notion of postsecularism they focus not so much on the return of religion, but emphasise 'the resilience of the city as a spiritual place' and everyday practices of 'Spiritualizing the City' (Hegner & Margry, 2016, p. 3). Unlike urban planning they 'look at religions in the city less as a political expression than as a specific urban way of life' (ibid, p. 6). In doing so, they highlight the material dimension of religious presence and processes of religious space-making for example through sacred buildings, public prayers and processions. These considerations on the 'urbansque' as a specific mode of religious practice and representation might conceptually inform the notion of dialogical 'praxis' in the ReDi project and offer a useful heuristic for some of the phenomena in the case studies of this volume, such as 'public celebrations and commemorations' (Ipgrave, p. 89) or the 'God's House Project' which take an interest in the 'physical places in the neighbourhood and people's interpretations of these places' (Liljestrand, p. 160). Moreover, based on a broad transregional perspective anthropologists have criticised the idea of postsecularism for assuming processes of secularisation which have not taken place in many cities of the global South (metroZones, 2011, pp. 13–14). At the same time they underlined the various channels through which religious communities, world views and practices shape urban life worlds, for example political mobilisation,

social services, public ritual and visions of individual and collective prosperity (ibid, pp. 16–17).

3. Outlook: promising perspectives for further research

From this sketchy outline of important results from the ReDi project and against the background of neighbouring scholarly debates on modern metropolises as habitats of religious communities (at least) two perspectives for further research can be envisaged: understanding the causal mechanisms of interfaith activism and expanding the spatial and temporal context of research.

Understanding causal mechanisms

The case studies in this volume present a variety of descriptive evidence of dialogical practice in different urban and national contexts. It is important to note that in the emerging field of empirical interfaith studies such a comparative synopsis is of value in itself. It provides a good point of departure for a more rigid comparative approach to systematically answer the questions: ‘how does it work?’ and ‘what does it mean?’ Both questions are concerned with the causal mechanisms of dialogical praxis. While the first question addresses the conditions for (different modalities of) interfaith activism the second one puts a focus on potential outcomes. In my view it would be a promising next step to a) elucidate ideal typical conditions and effects *within* the single case studies through contextual analysis and to b) develop a systematic model of urban dialogical praxis *across* these case-context units. In doing so, it might be helpful to distinguish between an internal and an external as well as a structural and an ideational dimension of both conditions and effects (Nagel, 2015, pp. 27–31). The case studies allude to some external structural factors, such as state-church regimes and the (lack of) options for administrative action (such as state treaties or public funding) as well as internal ideational factors (such as the religious and organisational rationales of religious communities to take part in interreligious praxis). Likewise, it would be interesting to learn more about external ideational factors (for example, urban or quarter-based myths of conviviality, such as being a cosmopolitan harbour city) and both structural and ideational changes in religious communities in response to their involvement in dialogical praxis (such as stratification to meet the ‘burden of representation’ or theological innovations).

Expanding the context

For comparative purposes it seems fruitful to expand the research context on a spatial and a temporal scale. The following considerations are more general programmatic suggestions for the further development of empirical interfaith studies. On a spa-

tial scale it would be desirable to see more research on interreligious activities in multifaith cities of the global South which exhibit different trajectories of religious presence in the urban public. On a temporal scale it would be desirable to take a diachronic approach to the modalities religious and confessional coexistence in cities from the late ancient until the modern time. This might help to situate contemporary findings and observations in the wider course of a European History of Religion and thus allow us to elucidate long term trends and continuities.

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