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The ›Safe Space‹ as a Symbol of Religionization in Interfaith Education

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel wird das pädagogische Konzept des ›Safe Space‹ in interreligiöser Bildung kritisch untersucht, indem seine Implikationen aus der Perspektive der religionization beleuchtet werden. Auf der Grundlage von Moyaerts (2024) Analyse von religionization seit dem dialogical turn untersucht der Beitrag, wie der Fokus darauf, ›Safe Spaces‹ in der interreligiösen Bildung zu schaffen, paradoxerweise religiöse Ungleichheiten aufrechterhalten kann, anstatt sie abzubauen. Erstens wird vorgeschlagen, dass der Fokus auf ›Safe Spaces‹ im interreligiösen Dialog eine glaubensorientierte, individualisierte und rationale Herangehensweise an Religion in den Vordergrund stellt und damit potenziell Ideen von ›guter‹ und ›schlechter‹ Religion verstärkt. Zweitens untersucht der Artikel alternative pädagogische Ansätze, die von Erkenntnissen aus der Bildung für soziale Gerechtigkeit und kritischen interreligiösen Studien inspiriert sind. Er regt dazu an, in der interreligiösen Pädagogik ›Brave Spaces‹ zu schaffen, um christliche Normativität infrage zu stellen und sich dem unangenehmen Gefühl zu stellen, mit dem Ziel, gerechtere und inklusivere Gesellschaften zu schaffen.

Summary

This article critically examines the pedagogical concept of ›safe space‹ within interfaith education by exploring its implications through the lens of religionization. Drawing on Moyaert's (2024) analysis of religionization since the Dialogical Turn, the paper explores how the emphasis on creating safe spaces in interfaith education may paradoxically perpetuate religious inequalities instead of dismantling them. First, it proposes that the emphasis on ›safe spaces‹ in interfaith dialogue prioritizes belief-oriented, individualized and rational approaches to religion, potentially reiterating ideas of ›good‹ and ›bad‹ religion. Secondly, the article explores alternative pedagogical approaches, inspired by insights from social justice education and critical interfaith studies. It proposes that interfaith pedagogies build ›brave spaces‹ to challenge Christian normativity and embrace the discomfort of working towards more just and inclusive societies.

About the Author

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1. Introduction

As our societies are growing more religiously diverse, interfaith education is perceived as a hopeful response to creating inclusive and just societies. It intends to do so by stimulating openness among participants, inspiring mutual appreciation and respect, and enhancing religious literacy (Patel 2016). Accomplishing that full potential is, however, not always easy. As religions and worldviews relate to one's existential beliefs and daily practices, interfaith dialogue often requires coming to terms with irreducible differences. Scholars and educators have therefore been trying to find pedagogical ingredients that stimulate participants' competencies to engage with religious others. One such proposed key ingredient is a safe space: providing a »non-threatening, encouraging environment for students to gather and deepen their understanding of diverse worldviews and lifeways« (Lindsay 2020: 23). As understood in interfaith education, a safe space can either imply a depersonalized, value-free learning setting that stimulates participants' objectivity (Lindsay 2020), or, more commonly, a narrative approach that focuses on participants' individual experiences (Daddow et al. 2021).[1] The outcome is thus visualized as an educational setting that minimizes the risk of conflict while stimulating participants' respectful engagement with other worldviews. The metaphor of a safe space is now so central in interfaith education that it has even found its way into the preconditions for interfaith and intercultural education established by the Council of Europe (Jackson 2014: 57).[2]

The emphasis on safe spaces in interfaith education is illustrative of the emerging scholarship on the topic: the largest portion of interfaith work currently focuses on mutual appreciation and understanding or knowledge about other worldviews, as the concept of safe space also underlines (Visser et al. 2023). However, in social justice education as well as in the margins of the field of interfaith learning, the emphasis on mutual appreciation and conflict-free learning environments has been increasingly critiqued since its focus on safety may not succeed in addressing the power dynamics inherent to interfaith work: »learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficulty and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety« (Arao and Clemens 2013: 139). In this paper, I will critically consider the concept of safe space in interfaith

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1   In this paper, I do not refer to the original meaning of ›safe spaces‹ as places where marginalized groups found a safe haven to imagine change, but rather to the mainstream understanding as conflict-free classrooms (Shelton et al. 2019: 110).

2   Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education.

dialogue, using the lens of religionization, with a focus on religionization since the Dialogical Turn (Moyaert 2024: chapter 9). I propose that the emphasis on safe spaces in interfaith education can be seen as a symbol of religionized patterns of thinking since the Dialogical Turn because it privileges a protestant Christian understanding of religion, which is then equated to ›good‹ religion, while at the same time impeding the actions necessary to dismantle these dynamics. I will unpack these points by first exploring how the metaphor of safe space in interfaith education may continue patterns of religionization. Secondly, in line with a few voices in the field of interfaith learning that have reflected on interfaith education from the perspective of power dynamics and privilege (Edwards 2018; Syeed/Hadsell 2020; Grung 2022), I will explore how a safe space may hinder the actions necessary to dismantle power dynamics.

2. Safe Spaces Continuing Patterns of Religionization

In her analysis of the Dialogical Turn (chapter 9), Moyaert (2024) sheds light on the paradoxical history of interfaith dialogue. Often perceived as »a turn away from polemics and intolerance« (Id. 291), interfaith dialogue is envisioned as a means to foster peaceful relations. The idea that religions are beyond competing and converting but can now collaborate and communicate harmoniously has especially gained traction since the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, supposedly the first peaceful encounter of all »world religions«, and has increased in the 20th century. However, Moyaert (2024) reveals its dual potential: serving as a tool for dismantling religious intolerance and inequality while, paradoxically, acting as a way that can inadvertently perpetuate these structures at the same time. While it is true that interfaith dialogue can contribute to building peaceful relations,

> … calls for dialogue can just as easily be invoked to reinforce a civilizational discourse that legitimizes discriminatory practices or enables those in power to overlook the ways they themselves are enmeshed in violence (Id. 330).

I propose that the emphasis on creating safe spaces in interfaith education is apt to continue these discriminatory dynamics. As interpreted by most interfaith educators, a safe space implies that participants exchange their individual experiences to »respectfully articulate stories of their own faith traditions, belief frameworks, and personal journeys« (Daddow et al. 2020: 477). Such an exchange aligns with what Jackson (2014: 47) called interpretive and dialogical didactical approaches, requiring a safe atmosphere of »open and respectful exchange of views within the classroom.« Thus, the safe spaces in interfaith education often center on individual experiences and rationality. However, as Moyaert (2022: 355) described elsewhere, when interfaith education centralizes such personalized, depoliticized approaches, interfaith dialogue »exudes a modern, Christianized understanding of religion« by privileging belief-oriented, personal dimensions of faith. The safe space, through its focus on individual convictions and cognitive explanations in order to avoid conflict and harm, can therefore unconsciously follow a Christian blueprint, particularly privileging the religious understanding of white, Protestant Christian participants over others (Moyaert 2018). As long as a critical analysis of this blueprint remains absent, this implicit Chris-

tian normativity then perpetuates, further reinforcing existing inequalities within interfaith spaces. In sum, the pedagogical ingredients of a safe space in interfaith education may mostly fit with a (white) Protestant Christian understanding of religion.

Moreover, participants who choose not to engage with or withdraw from interfaith dialogue, either physically or mentally, may be labeled as problematic since ›good‹ religion is now synonymous with dialogical religion:

> Not to participate in dialogue is to perform bad, problematic and perhaps even fanatical religion. Against this background, the real religious other is the non-dialogical other, the fundamentalist, the fanatic, the exclusivist (Moyaert 2024: 318).

In that sense, the way interfaith programs are organized, focusing on safe – i. e., rational, conflict-free, individualized – spaces poses a risk. This risk involves overlooking Christian biases and privileges, historical roots of current dynamics, colonial legacies, and social-political contexts. As interfaith dialogue looks at a hopeful future, not at the »violent past«, it pleads that the interfaith space be free from critical reflection and deconstruction of existing inequalities. At the same time, it categorizes those who choose not to participate as problematic, although the dynamics described are perfectly understandable reasons not to. Safe spaces can thus be seen as a symbol of these patterns.

3. Alternatives to a Safe Space in Interfaith Education

Although it has not yet found its way to the interfaith space, the concept of safe space has elicited profound critique in neighboring disciplines, particularly in social justice education. This critique contends that the notion of safe space presumes a risk-free environment which, by definition, perpetuates the status quo, thus reinforcing, instead of dismantling, power imbalances, privilege and marginalization (Arao/Clemens 2013; Boostrom 1998). Social justice and critical race educators have shown that

> for marginalized and oppressed minorities *there is no safe space* (…). [M]ainstream race dialogue in education is arguably already hostile and unsafe for many students of color whose perspectives and experiences are consistently minimized. Violence is already there (Leonardo/Porter 2010: 149, emphasis in original).

While these critiques have primarily centered on racism, sexism and other types of oppression and discrimination in education, a parallel critique applies to the field of interfaith education. As discussed above, the emphasis on safe space in interfaith education may inadvertently perpetuate Christian privileges, neglecting to address issues related to religious discrimination and oppression (Edwards 2018). The essence of the critique on safe spaces is the question of whether, by avoiding conflict and controversial issues, the norm is genuinely being deconstructed. Flensner and Von Der Lippe (2019: 275) raise the question of »being safe from what? – and safe for whom?« to highlight that (inter)religious education cannot be safe for all students all the time. Safety is often conflated with comfort or the absence of difficulty, whereas liberating education can (and perhaps should) be provocative and push the boundaries of one's comfort zone (Arao/

Clemens 2013; Freire 1970, 1993). A classroom that is supposedly safe for all the students all the time will therefore most likely not succeed in challenging Christian normativity. Instead, if interfaith education does not actively and overtly address Christian privilege, which is often the case when emphasizing harmonious and conflict-free environments, it can leave (white) Christian participants feeling enriched while, at the same time, ignoring or even damaging participants from marginalized groups (Edwards 2018: 172–173).

In social justice education, several alternative concepts have been introduced to highlight that education is (supposed to be) challenging, uncomfortable and disruptive, such as ›brave space‹ (Arao/Clemens 2013), ›classroom of disagreement‹ (Flensner/Von Der Lippe 2019), and ›pedagogy of discomfort‹ (Boler 1999). In line with such pedagogical approaches, an increasing group of interfaith scholars advocates that interfaith education should stimulate participants to enter into the discomfort of reflecting on one's own privileges and prejudices, learning about histories of oppression, and examining how power is embedded into interfaith interactions instead of shying away from conflict and controversial topics. As I described more elaborately elsewhere (cf. Visser, forthcoming), a critical interfaith pedagogy, one that accounts for dynamics of power and privilege, would indeed start by creating a ›brave space‹ that acknowledges the pain, discomfort, and risk inherent to interfaith learning. Moreover, it must consider the contextual histories embedded in interfaith relations. Moyaert's (2024) analysis of religionization provides a valuable starting point for this contextual historical awareness. Such an approach would then facilitate exploring European histories of othering, inequality, discrimination and oppression and initiating the uncomfortable conversations needed to challenge inequality.

4. Conclusion

Moyaert's (2024: 330) analysis of the Dialogical Turn underscores the reality that »invoking the notion of interfaith dialogue and fellowship will not suffice to interrupt processes of religionization.« Indeed, by relying on safe spaces as a key pedagogical ingredient, interfaith dialogue may inadvertently perpetuate the construction and projection of images of Self and Other, of ›good‹ and ›bad‹ religion. Simultaneously, it creates obstacles that hinder the critical examination and dismantling of these very images. As scholars in social justice education ascertain, the concept of safe space risks privileging those in dominant positions over those who already experience harm and unsafety in our societies. Education holds a unique position to contribute to dismantling oppressive systems (Freire 1970, 1993). In light of Moyaert's critical analyses of the legacies of our histories, interfaith education will hopefully chart a course toward recognizing unequal patterns and working towards more nuanced, self-reflective, critical, brave approaches to constructively working towards more inclusive and equal societies.

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