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# COMPETENCES IN INTER-RELIGIOUS LEARNING

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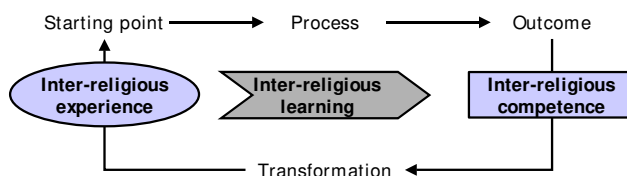
## Key Words

**Pedagogical competence, (inter-) religious competence, dialogue competence, subject-orientation, action-orientation, theory of communicative action**

## Introduction

Throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious education has repeatedly had to justify its original place in general education. The core issue is the extent to which it can contribute to the most fundamental educational goals, i.e. to help individuals to develop their own identity and empower them to become capable of acting in modern society. In this respect, Wright (1996, p. 175), for example, sees religious literacy as “his or her ability to think, act and communicate with insight and intelligence in the light of that diversity of religious truth claims that are the mark of our contemporary culture.” This statement contains two central themes: *first*, the most important challenge to contemporary societies, religious diversity, and *second*, the original contribution of religious education to this challenge, formulated in terms of action-oriented abilities or, in other words, competences. As such, this chapter seeks to address what it means to adopt the pedagogical concept of competence within the context of inter-religious learning. The following figure may serve as an initial clarification of the interdependence of the basic terms (cf. Vött, 2002, p. 60).

*Fig. 1: Competences in inter-religious learning*



The experience of religious diversity and plurality marks the starting point of inter-religious learning, which is understood as a transforming process that is circularly fed back to situational conditions (cf. Berling, 2007; 2004). Inter-religious competence means the desired or factual outcome of this process in relation to life-world related demands and with limited generalisation in respect of new challenges. While these abilities are deeply connected with religious identity, which emerges from a personal position in relation to others, they can be achieved neither through a mono- nor a multi-religious approach (cf. Ziebertz, 2007; 1993; Tautz, 2007, pp. 21–79). The principal thesis of this chapter, therefore, is that inter-religious learning has to be understood as a constitutive and essential part of religious learning rather than being an opposite or alternative thereof. Inter-religious dialogue and learning are always and coincidentally intra-religious (cf. Sajak, 2005, pp. 290–295; Ziebertz, 1991, p. 326). This is one of the reasons why this chapter is divided into three consecutive sections: initially clarifying the pedagogical key term of competence, subsequently proposing a concept of religious competence in general and finally transforming this concept into a model of competence in inter-religious learning.

### **Competence as a pedagogical concept**

At first glance, the meaning of the term competence seems to be reasonably clear. In everyday speech, competence – outside specific juridical contexts – is usually linked to a capacity or specific quality of a person. It does appear somewhat difficult, however, to judge under what terms someone is to be called competent, while the opposite is significantly more straightforward: incompetence describes a person failing to do a job, to perform a task or to fulfil a particular role. The phenomenon of incompetence occurs where the knowledge, skills and capabilities of a person do not match the requirements of a position held or a task to be completed. On the basis of these negative clarifications, the positive concept of competence can be described as the ability to do something well, especially where this term defines the skills and knowledge needed in the context of a particular job or task. More generally, if all factual and potential jobs and tasks that a person may be confronted with during a lifetime are seen in combination, competence may be seen as a sufficiency of means for the necessities and conveniences of life (cf. Müller-Ruckwitt, 2008, pp. 109–123). All in all, the everyday meaning of competence is not quite this abstract, but three concrete terminological aspects of usage can be identified for further consideration: *Firstly*, although the term competence can be applied to a group of persons (e.g. a ‘competence team’), it is normally used as a subject-oriented term.

Speaking of competence means speaking of qualities (knowledge, skills and capabilities) of a specific person. *Secondly*, the concept of competence is closely associated with situations of performance: the identification of an individual as competent depends on their actions in challenging situations. Competence, therefore, is an action-oriented concept. *Thirdly*, the first two characteristics imply the last, which states that specific competences cannot be formulated as abstract definitions, as they are bound to a specific area or domain. Such competence necessitates a description of the field to which it is related.

### *Competence as a key term in pedagogy*

Beyond such basic linguistic concepts of competence, the spectrum of competence as a scientific term is significantly more complex (cf. Klieme & Hartig, 2008; Schmidt, 2005; Weinert, 2001). Competence is a popular concept in different sciences ranging from the psychological, social and educational sciences to the cognitive, linguistic or even economical ones. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that “the term ‘competence’ is associated with a wide variety of definitions and meanings” (Klieme & Hartig, 2008, p. 11). In a detailed terminological study, the German educationalist Anne Müller-Ruckwitt (2008) differentiates between the following five most influential theories of competence (cf. also Klieme & Hartig, 2008; Oelkers & Reusser, 2008, pp. 20–26): the competence approach of motivation psychology founded by Robert W. White (1959); the model of operative intelligence in developmental psychology (cf. Connolly & Bruner, 1974); the linguistic competence term according to Noam Chomsky (1995); the concept of communicative competence in the communication theory of Jürgen Habermas (1990); and the model of moral reasoning as cognitive competence developed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984).

This plurality of concepts and meanings does not only form an inter-disciplinary problem, but also an intra-disciplinary one. In most of the scientific fields mentioned above and in educational research in particular, the term competence is associated with controversial discussions. In an educational context the debate has been substantially stimulated by the so-called Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) coordinated by the Organisation for Economical Cooperation and Development (OECD, see [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)). The aim of this programme, which was launched in 1997, is to monitor “the extent to which students near the end of compulsory schooling have acquired the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society” (DeSeCo, 2005, p. 3). Since the first assessment in 2000, two further worldwide surveys have been carried out, with 57 countries contributing in 2006. While the initial focus was on

comparing students' literacy skills in posing, solving and interpreting problems in different domains, special emphasis is now put on the key category of competence, which is defined as follows (DeSeCo, 2005, p. 4; cf. Rychen & Salganik, 2001):

A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating.

This assessment programme claims to provide a theoretically sound and empirically validated model of competence in order to develop educational systems worldwide by means of quantitative empirical measurement and cross-national comparison. Although the programme, and its underlying competence model in particular, have often been criticised, it can be seen as the original stimulus for the wider focus upon the discourse of competence in educational science (cf. Müller-Ruckwitt, 2008, pp. 23–55).

#### *Relation to traditional pedagogical concepts*

In order to specify the theoretical foundation of competence as an educational key category, the relationship between the concept of competence, introduced in order to evaluate the success of educational processes and improve didactical planning, and the goals of education needs to be clarified and elucidated. This conceptual clarification is necessary for any evaluation of the extent to which the introduction of such a new concept actually contributes to the tools available to the educational researcher and facilitates the process of education. The intended relationship of competence to the traditional key category of educational goals is summarised concisely in the following statement of Eckhard Klieme (2004, p. 64):

Competency models [...] provide a framework for operationalisations of educational goals, which in turn allow the output of the education system to be monitored empirically in assessment programmes.

This delineation clearly states that the concept of competence is not intended to displace educational goals. On the contrary, competences have the same applications as the formulation of goals, but take a fundamentally different perspective: *firstly*, they aim to make traditionally

abstract goals (such as maturity of taking action under today's social and cultural conditions) more concrete. *Secondly*, they purport to achieve concrete goals by means of a shift of perspective. The classical point of view represented by educational goals is input-oriented, while the concept of competence focuses upon the desired outcomes of learning processes. Competences aim to provide a framework to “translate the content and levels of general education into specific terms. They thus constitute a pragmatic response to the issues of construction and legitimisation raised in traditional debates on education and curricula” (Klieme et al., 2004, p. 5). In this respect, competence is conceptually subordinated to educational goals and has to fulfil an auxiliary role.

The practical benefit of the concept of competence in relation to educational goals can be specified in two ways: the articulation of abstract educational goals in terms of specific learnable abilities and skills offers teachers a clear pedagogic and didactic focus for their work; at the same time, the operationalisation of educational goals facilitates the assessment and evaluation of students' learning outcomes.

#### *Defining pedagogical competence*

Returning to the heuristics touched upon above, the pedagogical concept of competence underlying this chapter can now be outlined. As Weinert (2001, p. 45) puts it, a competence is “a roughly specialized system of abilities, proficiencies, or skills that are necessary or sufficient to reach a specific goal”. The term is not to be understood as a reduction to the cognitive dimension of learning, but rather includes motivational, volitional and social dimensions (cf. Weinert, 2002, pp. 27f; 2001, pp. 62f). Beyond this general description, which puts competence (as a singular term) in a dependent relationship to educational goals, the following aspects of different competences (as a plural term) in learning processes can be specified.

The *first* aspect is that competences can only be learned in connection with specific domains. Even the so-called key competences, which have to be understood as cross-curricular skills such as reading or writing, need material content. In the words of Jürgen Oelkers and Kurt Reusser (2008, p. 21): “Competences cannot be developed ‘net’”, because they need concrete problems or challenges to appear. Therefore, the *second* characteristic becomes appropriate: the acquisition of competences is related to subject-oriented learning processes. Competences intend to translate abstract objective goals into subjective learning situations and problem solving in a *particular* domain. *Thirdly*, “the term competence therefore corresponds to a more pragmatic and

functional or action-based (as opposed to material or contemplative) understanding of knowledge and education” (Oelkers & Reusser, 2008, p. 21). Competences, while deeply action-based, are closely related to the life-world of students.

In short, in this chapter the term competence is used to refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to cope with life-related challenges within a domain-specific perspective (cf. Müller-Ruckwitt, 2008, p. 247).

### **Competence in Religious Education**

Due to the fact that competence must be understood as a domain-related concept, recent years have seen several attempts to apply the term to the field of Religious Education. It remains unclear, however, whether it is possible to actually define a specific religious competence. It is equally unclear to what extent such a competence – should it exist – could be differentiated into specific terms of knowledge, skills and actions which concretise – as the idea of competence postulates – the content and goals of religious education. One of the first attempts to appropriate the language and concept of competence undertaken by religious educators in Europe took the form of an anthology entitled “Towards religious Competence” (Heimbrock, Scheilke, & Schreiner, 2001; cf. also the important but little received earlier study: Hemel, 1988). In their introduction the editors state (Heimbrock et al., 2001, p. 9):

As a key term we introduce ‘*religious competence*’ as an overall aim of religious education. [...] Religious competence means being able to deal with one’s own religiosity and its various dimensions embedded in the dynamics of life-history in a responsible way but also to appreciate the religious view of others.

In comparison with the definition of competence as a pedagogical term in the earlier section of this paper, it is noticeable that the terms competence and goal are frequently mixed up in this reference. This results in a model where religious competence, as the ability to deal with the religiosity of oneself and of others, remains somewhat abstract (despite being definitely central in terms of its goals). Later on in the study, more concrete specifications are presented: religious competence includes active tolerance, ethical orientation, readiness for dialogue, and the handling of religious diversity (cf. Heimbrock et al., 2001, pp. 9 and 15).

This initial terminological fuzziness, however, has been removed by further theoretical work since then. In Germany, for example, two models of Christian religious competence have

gained influence, especially so in terms of curriculum reform. The first, concerning Protestant religious education, has been proposed by a group of experts at the Comenius Institute (cf. Fischer & Elsenbast, 2006); the second concerns Catholic religious education and includes the formulation of normative guidelines for standards in Catholic religious education in primary and secondary schools by the Bishops in Germany (cf. DBK, 2006; 2004). Both models explain religious competence in a comparable way, seeing it as a set of general dimensions that have to be connected with specific religious content (cf. Fischer & Elsenbast, 2006, p. 19; DBK, 2004, p. 13):

- Perceiving and describing of religious phenomena (perceptive dimension)
- Understanding and interpreting of religious knowledge and traditions (cognitive dimension)
- Forming and acting in forms of religious practice (performative dimension)
- Communicating and reasoning in connection with religious questions and creeds (interactive dimension)
- Participating and deciding in life-world related religious situations (participative dimension)

At least two points remain unclear in connection with this five-dimensional model of religious competence. The *first* is that these competences appear rather general, while the specific religious part is only introduced by religious content that has to be taught in order to develop the general competences. The, *second* issue is whether these competences can be related to an analysis of the concrete religious act. Such a theoretical definition, however, would be necessary for the subject-, domain- and action-orientation of competence to be taken seriously.

#### *Analysis of faith as communicative action*

If learning is defined “as the growing capacity or the growing competence of students to participate in culturally structured practices” (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001, p. 27), a theory of religious learning in terms of competence must be based on an analysis of the structures underlying religious practice. The theory of communicative action according to the Frankfurt school (cf. Habermas, 1984; 1987) suggests itself as a theoretical framework for the intended description of religious practice. This concept of communication goes beyond the simple sender-receiver-model and moves towards a model of communicative rationality, but can still be



described in straightforward terms. Each communicative act can be differentiated into five dimensions summed up in the following mnemonic: *I communicate – about something – with others – under contextual conditions – by using a specific form*. The five constituents of communicative action are: *first*, the autonomous subject that is communicating ('I communicate'), *secondly*, the content of communication as its objective-material aspect ('about something'), *thirdly*, the subjective counterpart of communication ('with others'), *fourthly*, the social life-world in which the action is situated ('under contextual conditions'), and *fifthly*, the aesthetic dimension concerning the perceivable form of communication ('by using a specific form'). According to Habermas, a successful communication oriented towards the ideal of total absence of domination has to guarantee certain communication claims in all five of these dimensions, ranging from truthfulness in the subjective dimension to aesthetic coherence in questions of form.

This model of communicative action forms the basis of the following analysis of the religious act (cf. Mette, 2005; Peukert, 1988). This analysis focuses on Christian faith as communicative action, primarily because a pure consideration of religious *action* without thinking of the *practice* of a specific religion would be unfeasible. A short mnemonic parallel to that above may, again, be helpful: *I believe – in God – who confronts me in the person of my neighbour – under the conditions of today's life – by using condign forms of expression*.

The *first* (and subjective) dimension refers to the inner reality of faith that motivates an individual's free decision of living in the gifted relationship to God (in traditional terms: *fides qua creditur*). The *second* (objective-material) dimension forms the necessary counterpart as the aspect of belief; no faith act could be imaginable without content (*fides quae creditur*). The *third* (and inter-subjective) dimension describes the relational reality of Christian faith – insofar as the vertical relationship to God is not to be separated from the horizontal relationship realized in human relationship (cf. Hull, 2008). The *fourth* (contextual) dimension extends this relational aspect of faith to the conditions of everyday life. Every faith act, finally, has to be situated in a contextual frame by use of certain subjectively authentic, inter-subjectively suitable and materially well-grounded forms, which constitute the *fifth* (and aesthetic) dimension of faith.

### *Competence model for Religious Education*

These theoretical reflections allow the suggestion of a competence model for Religious Education based on the analysis of Christian faith as communicative action:

- *Spiritual sensitivity* (subjective dimension): insofar as the act of faith is deeply rooted in human subjectivity, religious learning helps to develop awareness of a person's inner world of ultimate concern.
- *Religious knowledge and ability of reasoning* (objective-material dimension): in order to connect spirituality to reflected experience, religious learning brings the material dimension of faith as interpretational frame into play.
- *Ability to relationship* (inter-subjective dimension): Christian faith is concentrated on the idea that the way of experiencing God involves an encounter with the self and with others (including people of other religions). This is why sensitizing to personal relations must be at the heart of religious learning (cf. Boschki, 2006).
- *Capacity for action* (contextual dimension): While faith as communicative action is always dependent on social and cultural conditions, religious learning helps people to be religious in terms of thinking, acting and communicating in the light of religious truth claims (cf. Wright, 1996, p. 175).
- *Faculty of expression* (aesthetic dimension): Religious learning encourages people to search and find an appropriate way of correlating their personal belief with traditional religious forms (cf. Altmeyer, 2006).

In summary, religious competence is to be seen as the learnable ability to deal with life-world related challenges (cf. Helbling, 2004) by using religious rationality in its five dimensions, i.e. by returning to subjective points of ultimate concern, by reasoning in connection with religious tradition and creed, by relating to others as representatives of God, by substantiating options for action through religious claims, by using religiously relevant and coherent forms.

### **A two-dimensional model of competences in inter-religious learning**

The general description of religious competence as given in the previous section must also be applied to the field of inter-religious learning. As stated in the introduction, inter-religious learning ought not to be seen as an alternative to, but as a constitutive part of, religious learning. This assumption has furthermore become evident through the analysis of faith as communicative action underlying the proposed competence model. This has also been described as the claim of the inter-subjective dimension of faith, namely that the encounter with others (regardless of their religion) forms a crucial way of experiencing God. The call for inter-religious encounter and

dialogue, therefore, stands for more than some contingent requirement of post-modern times, but is founded in the relational reality of faith itself. The groundbreaking declarations of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) have to be read in this spirit: if Christians believe that all religions “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (Lumen Gentium, 16) because principally God is never “far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God” (Nostra Aetate, 2), then the willingness to engage in dialogue becomes a sign of Christian identity and authenticity (cf. the corresponding chapters of this handbook).

This background rationalizes the belief that in the majority of cases the general educational goal in the context of inter-religious learning lies in a mandate to encounter and come into dialogue with people of other religions (cf. current overviews in Pollefeyt, 2007; Schreiner, Sieg, & Elsenbast, 2005; Ruppell & Schreiner, 2003). This necessitates that an important part of religious educational discourse on inter-religious learning be focused on the pedagogical, cultural, theoretical and theological key term of dialogue. Insofar as competences try to translate educational goals to outcome-oriented terms in the form of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the next issue is this: which knowledge, skills and attitudes, which cognitive, pragmatic and emotional prerequisites are pedagogically in demand because they are supposed to be essential in order to enable or foster dialogue? What does a student have to know, be able to do or want in order to be capable of carrying out a dialogical encounter with people of other religions “with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life” (Nostra Aetate, 2)?

### *Inter-cultural dialogue competence*

While the concept of dialogue competence in religious education research is still rare (cf. Leimgruber, 2007; Lähnemann, 2005; Schreijäck, 2000) the approach to inter-religious dialogue competence has much to learn from the field of inter-cultural communication competence in the social sciences. Ever since the term was introduced in the late 1950s, there have been a large number of studies with a wide diversity of conceptual foci (cf. Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2006; Arasaratnam & Doerfelb, 2005; Gudykunst & Mody, 2004; Wiseman, 2004; 1997; Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 2000; Hannigan, 1990). Subject to an accurate clarification of the relationship between inter-cultural and inter-religious competence, the conceptualisations of inter-cultural competence are of great interest for religious education because they propose a wide range of empirically validated models and practical training concepts. A general definition has been proposed by Richard L. Wiseman (2004, p. 208), one of the leading scholars in intercultural

communication: “ICC [Intercultural communication] competence involves the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures”.

In accordance with the concept of religious competence presented in this chapter, this definition describes an interactive competence divided into the three basic components of knowledge, motivation and skills. This suggests that a fruitful discourse between the two fields seems feasible. In a central study, the German scholar Matthias Vött (2002) reviewed a large number of international models of inter-cultural communication competence in order to test their relevance and importance for inter-religious learning. Combining quantitative and qualitative criteria, he identified eight sub-competences that are linked to dialogue competence in inter-religious learning in general. He utilises concrete operationalisations that enable him to evaluate his competence model empirically. The eight components, arranged to the sections of knowledge, motivation and skills are defined as follows (cf. Vött, 2002, p. 129):

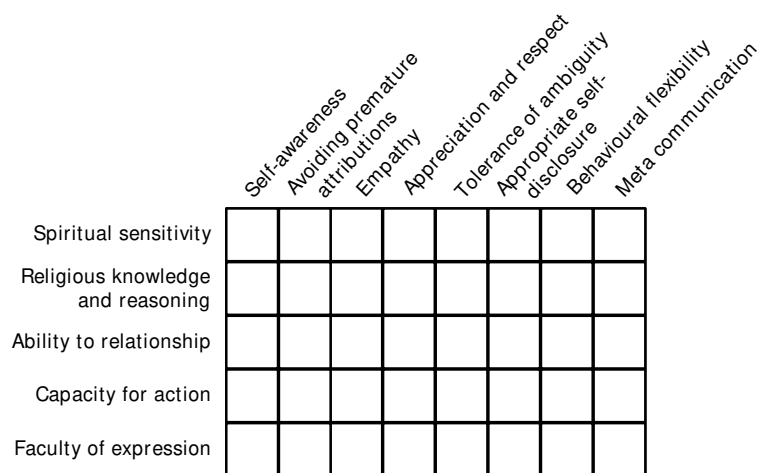
- Within the knowledge component as conceptualising “the information necessary to interact appropriately and effectively, and the requisite cognitive orientation to facilitate the acquisition of such information” (Wiseman, 2004, p. 218) he names *first*, self-awareness in terms of values and creeds and *second*, avoiding premature attributions.
- The motivational factors which influence one’s affect over others are represented by the sub-competences of *first*, empathy, and *second*, appreciation and respect.
- In the third sector, reflecting “the needed behaviors to interact appropriately and effectively” (Wiseman, 2004, p. 219), Vött identifies *first*, tolerance of ambiguity, *second*, appropriate self-disclosure, *third*, behavioural flexibility, and *fourth*, meta communication.

### *Competences in inter-religious learning*

This model of dialogue competence finally allows an assessment of competences for inter-religious learning. While the fundamental thesis of this chapter implies that inter-religious learning must be seen as an essential part of religious learning, the problem of defining inter-religious competence cannot be solved by simply adding two specific religious competences to the list of dialogue competences, as proposed by Vött (2002, pp. 126-129). On the contrary, it must be shown how each dimension of dialogue competence can be integrated into at least one dimension of religious competence. To this end, the two-dimensional model of competence for

inter-religious learning shown below illustrates how a competence for inter-religious learning can be formulated by combining dialogical competences (as listed on the horizontal axis) with religious competences (as listed on the vertical axis). Such a combination process alone guarantees the complex enmeshment of both components of inter-religious learning: concerning the dimension of ‘intra’ as well as of ‘inter’.

Fig. 2: Two-dimensional model of competences in inter-religious learning



The following examples illustrate the function of this two-dimensional model and shows how it can be used to provide a framework for didactical questions as well as for the assessment of inter-religious learning processes. The idea is to place an intended learning process in the context of specified religious competences. The examples are taken from the list of competences provided by the German Religious Education scholar Stephan Leimgruber (2007, pp. 100f) in his book on inter-religious learning.

- Leimgruber specifies three competences concerning knowledge, i.e. *perceiving*, *knowing* and *understanding* the contents of other religions, their beliefs, their religious convictions as accessible in documents, testimonies, etc. In the figure provided above, the knowledge component is found in the first two columns, showing that these competences can be specified as primarily applied to self-awareness or to awareness of the other. This poses

the didactical question to which dimension of religious learning one would assign the three knowledge competences.

- Leimgruber's competence of *dealing with respect* with the expressions of other religions can be placed in the fourth column of dialogical competence. Once again, however, the interesting question of which dimension of religious learning should be touched (e.g. spiritual sensitivity or faculty of expression?) remains.
- Finally, Leimgruber names two competences in the field of behavioural skills, i.e. *communication and encounter* and *acting together* for common goals. In this case, the correlation with the third and fourth row (ability to relationship, capacity for action) suggests itself. The dialogue competence axis, however, makes it obvious that no less than four dialogical competences are included in this (ranging from tolerance of ambiguity to meta communication).

Such and similar reflections by means of the two-dimensional scheme of competences may be helpful in translating the abstract and extensive goals of inter-religious education into learning processes. This translation task, however, remains to be done on site, since competences are always subject-oriented and action-based and therefore highly dependent on contextual conditions.

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