Article

Ethics Education in the Context of an Interreligious Encounter Day (IED): Empirical Research Results from Austria

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Abstract: This article adds an empirical contribution to international discussions on interreligious education, taking the point of view of the academic study of religion. It presents results from a Viennese research project that used a participant observation design to analyze one of the more recent pedagogical formats to deal with religious plurality at school—the so-called Interreligious Encounter Day (IED). More precisely this article focuses on the role of Ethics Education (EE) within the context of a specific IED that was organized in 2019. Along those lines, it highlights the ambiguity of IED practices at a school by presenting a threefold argument: first, the article makes the point that the IED opened up a space to explicitly make religion a subject of discussion at school. Second, it argues that—within the context of the IED—religion is constructed in a specific way that can be described as 'school religion'. Third, it proposes that the observed IED format has the tendency to prioritize specific individual constructions of religion—especially those prompted by theology.

Keywords: interreligious encounter learning; Austria; school; Sociology of Religion

1. Introduction

The contributions to this special issue are embedded in a longstanding international discussion on interreligious education (Meyer 2021; Schweitzer 2014; Engebretson et al. 2010). As pointed out in the introduction to this issue, these debates usually start from the empirical observation that religious plurality is growing. In a second step they tend to argue that various interreligious formats and methodologies help to deal with this situation—in the context of formal education and beyond.

Of course, these debates have triggered critical responses (Kraml et al. 2022; Hong 2021; Syeed and Hadsell 2020; Lehmann 2023a). To various degrees these responses make the very notion of 'the interreligious' as well as the national entrenchment of interreligious education subjects of discussion. Gritt Klinkhammer et al. have underlined the new modes of religion that can be produced within interreligious settings (Klinkhammer et al. 2011). Mar Griera and Lise G. Galal stress the power relations within interreligious contexts and critically engage with labelling processes (Galal 2020; Griera 2018).

This article wants to add an empirical contribution to these debates that takes the point of view of the academic study of religion. It will present results from an Austrian research project undertaken in Vienna (thus abbreviated as the "Vienna Project") that has used a participant observation design to analyze one of the more recent proposals to deal with religious plurality at school—the so-called Interreligious Encounter Day (IED). More precisely, the article will focus on the role of Ethics Education (EE) within the context of a specific IED that was organized in 2019.

Along those lines, the article highlights the ambiguity of IED practices at school and presents a threefold argument:

- First, it will make the point that the IED in Vienna opened up a space to explicitly make religion a subject of discussion at school.

- Second, the article will argue that—within the context of the IED—religion is constructed in a very specific way that can be described as 'school religion'.
- Third, it will propose that the observed IED format has the tendency to prioritize specific individual constructions of religion—especially those prompted by theology.

To make this argument, the article begins with a section on religious plurality and interreligious encounter learning (IEL) in general, as well as the Interreligious Encounter Day (IED) in particular (Section 2). In a second step it will sketch the Vienna Project that provides the empirical basis for the argument (Section 3). The main section will focus on selected sequences from observation protocols that were produced for the Vienna Project (Section 4). The article closes with concluding remarks on the concept of interreligious education at school (Section 5).

2. On the State of the Art

The topic of religious plurality has become an integral part of scholarly debate. The present section is not the place to present these debates in any sufficient detail. It will rather focus on the more recent discussions within the Academic Study of Religion that challenge the idea that religious plurality in Europe can be reduced to the copresence of religious traditions since the 1960s (Section 2.1). On this basis the present section will focus on those strands of Religious Pedagogy that argue for interreligious encounters as the ideal solution to deal with processes of religious pluralization (Section 2.2).

2.1. Religious Studies on Religious Plurality

Over the last two decades, scholars of religion have repeatedly made the point that religious plurality has to be treated as a highly complex phenomenon. Religious plurality must not be reduced to the presence of several religious traditions in a specific socio-cultural space. One rather has to approach religious plurality as a multidimensional phenomenon. In the introduction to their classic anthology *Religiöser Pluralismus*, Martin Baumann and Samuel M. Behloul (Baumann and Behloul 2005, p. 8) call for religious plurality to be understood within the framework of new category systems that question traditional approaches to religion and thus open up further perspectives:

> "It [religious pluralism] is neither only a question of a (co-)existence of several religious traditions in a certain place under the conditions of plurality and legal secularity, nor only a question of the processes of polarization and division within religions along the lines of a tradition- or time-appropriate handling of religious truths of the respective religious community. Within one and the same religious tradition, parallel developments have recently been observed that go beyond the classic conservative/progressive pattern. The individual himself has become the new carrier and multiplier of 'not belonging'." (Baumann and Behloul 2005, p. 8—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

This quotation stands pars pro toto for a much wider debate in a diverse field of research. In this field, national and international debates are closely interwoven (Arweck and Shipley 2019; Woodhead 2017; Arweck and Jackson 2014; Jödicke 2013). In addition, those discussions are structured by distinct disciplinary traditions. Lasting differences have emerged that draw attention to specific aspects of religious plurality.

For the present purpose, two strands of these discussions are particularly important: on the one hand, German-language research within the Academic Study of Religion has been emphasizing the long traditions of religious plurality in Europe (Zander 2016; Gladigow 1995). In a variety of historical studies, scholars such as Hans G. Kippenberg (Kippenberg et al. 2009), Christoph Auffarth (Auffarth et al. 2006), and Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013) have made clear how different components of religious systems of symbols are related to each other—for example, theological and philosophical reflections or references to human rights and science. They thus propose to understand European religious history as a process

in which pluralistic religious and ideological traditions have emerged. Religious plurality as an "organization of difference" is interpreted as a "structural element of European cultural history" (Stuckrad 2004, p. 19).

On the other hand, the Sociology of Religion tends to analyse religious plurality within the framework of secularization theory. For a long time, the theory of pluralization (together with the theory of individualization) was seen as an alternative to the classic model of secularization—conceptualized as the (individual and/or collective) loss of the importance of religion in the modern age (Inglehart 2020; Bruce 2013). In the meantime, however, classic secularization theory has been modified from various perspectives. Secularization and pluralization are no longer regarded as exclusive opposites, but rather used as complementary approaches to understand present-day religion in a wider context.

Over recent years, Austrian scholars have produced a growing body of literature that applies these two strands of thought to deal specifically with religious plurality in Austria. They have underlined the long traditions of religious plurality in Austria (Hödl and Pokorny 2012, (ff); Vocelka 2013) as well as the complexity of the processes at work—on the micro-, the meso-, and the macrolevel (Lehmann and Reiss 2022; Koch and Lehmann 2021). This will serve as a point of reference for the following considerations on the practice of interreligious learning.

2.2. Religious Pedagogy on Interreligious Learning

The above reading of religious plurality has particularly influenced those educational approaches to religion that are in German called *'Religionskunde'*—in English one talks inter alia about 'instruction on religion' and in French about *'didactique des sciences des religions'* (Alberts et al. 2023; Bleisch and Bietenhard 2018; Frank 2010). In practice, this approach is, however, still relatively marginal in Austria. It is notably Religious Education (based upon a 'learning from religion' and/or a 'learning in religion' approach) that dominates religious education at school and is thus particularly confronted with processes of religious pluralization (Lehner-Hartmann et al. 2023; Krobath et al. 2019). These discussions have, among other things, been shaped by intense debates about different approaches to interreligious learning.

Within this didactical framework, the concepts of religion and religious plurality have become the subject of increasing (self-)criticism in religious pedagogy too. Scholars such as Edda Strutzenberger-Reiter (2016), Friedrich Schweitzer (2014), and Martin Jäggle (Jäggle et al. 2013) refer to recent discussion in the sociology of religion and argue for the usage of a complex concept of religion that particularly takes individualized forms of religion into account. Religious scholars have further fueled these debates by identifying and criticizing the use of normative–reductionist concepts of religious plurality in teaching practice (Zulehner 2011).

This is the wider conceptual context in which the concept of interreligious encounter learning (IEL) emerged. To give but a few poignant references that help to characterize the present academic discourse in this field: Stephan Leimgruber argues that dialog and efforts to understand others are "at the heart of encounter learning" (Leimgruber 2007, p. 20f.). In the same tradition, Folkert Rickers describes IEL's main advantage as being that members of a religion "speak authentically about their faith and religious practice" (Rickers 2001, p. 875). Mirjam Schambeck would be another author that argues for the establishment of interreligious competences. For her, religion has an existential dimension; therefore, so-called "authentic speaking situations" are necessary, in which people do not speak from a distance, but from their own experience about what moves them in their religion (Schambeck 2013, p. 224).

All these scholars attribute a particular strength to those forms of interaction they describe with the problematic notion of 'authenticity'—in terms of encounters and/or speaking situations. Referring to recent systematic and empirical studies, they basically underline the individualized characteristics of present-day religion and make the point that

learning about, from, or in religion needs to accommodate to these specific characteristics by creating social setting for personalized interaction (Wissner et al. 2020; Kropač 2019).

In the past decade, Katja Boehme has presented a concept of interreligious encounter learning that picks up on these debates while—at the same time—adding a new twist to the discussions. Boehme moves away from the question of authenticity, and centers on the structured form of an Interreligious Encounter Day (IED) and the encounter between pupils attending certain school subjects (Boehme and Stahmann 2023; Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg et al. 2023). For this purpose, she proposes project-based cooperations between denominational Religious Education (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Jewish, etc.) and Ethics- or Philosophy Education (in the end perceived as a school subject parallel to the various forms of Religious Education). Boehme argues that a jointly defined, religiously relevant topic should be presented and discussed at the IED. For this purpose, she distinguishes between four phases:

1. Phase of Preparation: the students work on a defined topic in their respective classes. They each prepare a presentation for the IED.
2. Phase of Presentation: the presentations are presented to the students from the other classes (mixed groups) as part of a project day.
3. Phase of Discussion: based on the presentations, the students (mixed groups) engage in an exchange that uses discussion groups.
4. Phase of Reflection: the pupils return to their respective classes and further reflection takes place. (Boehme 2023, pp. 378–86; Boehme 2021)

This concept has already inspired a number of empirical studies. The evaluation of an IED at the Heidelberg University of Education has shown both an increase in subject-specific knowledge about other religions and cultures, as well as a contribution to finding one's own identity. (Boehme and Brodhäcker 2015, 2013). A similar approach to IEL was analyzed at the University College for Teacher Education of the Churches (KPH), Vienna/Krems. The evaluation found an increase in interreligious competence in the dimensions of "interest in the other religion", "knowledge about other religions", "ability to adopt perspectives", and "tolerance" (Garcia Sobreira-Majer et al. 2014, p. 180ff.). Finally, Christian Ratzke concludes in his recently published dissertation, which is based on qualitative and quantitative studies on encounter learning at the PH Heidelberg and the KPH Vienna/Krems (Ratzke 2021), that interreligious encounter learning can initiate the development of interreligious process-related subcompetencies in prospective ethics and religion teachers.

These debates formed the frame of reference for the Vienna Project that took place in the summer semester of 2019 at a secondary school in Vienna. Referring to the academic debates presented in this section, it analyzed a particular IED, focusing on the constructions of religion and authenticity within the context of this IED. The data collected for this project will now be used to analyze the role of ethics education. More precisely the analyses will center around the following genuine questions that help to add a new dimension to the discussion of the IED: how is the IED put into practice? How is religion constructed within the context of the IED? What makes it interreligious? How do pupils act within this specific setting? And notably: what is the role of ethics education in all of this?

3. On the Vienna Project

The data from the Vienna Project help to answer these questions in a particular way. First, the project applied a participant observation design, which is still relatively rare in pedagogical research. The project focused on practice—rather than ex-post evaluation— (Section 3.1). Second, the project focused on an IED in the tradition of Katja Boehme. It thus approached an interreligious format that is currently of particular prominence in Austria (Section 3.2). Third, the IED that has been analyzed for the Vienna Project systematically included Ethics Education (EE). Therefore, the project provides dense and consistent data on the role of EE within the context of the IED (Section 3.3).

3.1. Participant Observation in Vienna

Throughout the last two decades, participant observation has again become increasingly important (even though it is still relatively rare) in German-language research (Beer and König 2020). In particular, Georg Breidenstein has contributed to a spread of observation methods in pedagogical research. In his studies (e.g., on the "job of a pupil") Breidenstein focusses on the learning actions of pupils and the teaching events to which they are "exposed" (Breidenstein 2006). He proposes to concentrate less on the self-reports of the pupils and teachers—as can be collected through questionnaires or interviews—and more on the observable forms of behavior, action, and interaction.

The analyses of the Encounter Day undertaken by the Vienna Project were based upon an approach that starts from an intentionally wide (sociological) concept of religion as well as a (critical) notion of authenticity (as interactions that are explicitly framed by actors in terms of individualization). They thus use classroom observation as a methodological tool for data collection (Reh and Rabenstein 2013)—systematically distinguishing between the ascription of concepts to participants and the interpretation of action in terms of concepts originating from the researchers. This is very much embedded into the methodological traditions of social and cultural studies. It opens up the possibility of reconstructing "analytical reflective knowledge" (Büttner et al. 2019, p. 11).

Within this framework, six fundamental methodological decisions were made to research the Interreligious Encounter Day in question:

- First, the group of researchers decided—in contrast to the other studies on IEDs—to consider all four phases of the IED (in religious and ethics education classes and mixed groups) as well as one lesson that was attended by the pupils in their respective school classes.
- In all phases, the observations of the research team—in consultation with the respective teachers—focused on selected pupils from the respective teaching groups. These were referred to as 'focus pupils' (FP).
- One particularly momentous decision was to follow Katja Boehme's didactical model and to include Ethics Education in the IED. This integrated a school subject into the analysis that is fundamentally different from denominational religious education.
- As far as the actual data collection is concerned, the researchers' observations were documented using an open protocol procedure (as far as possible including also speech into the analyses). From the outset ad hoc interpretations were integrated into the protocols.
- Due to formal restrictions, there was—unfortunately—no way to use tape or video recordings for data collection. This would have provided much more dense material. The researchers have tried to compensate for this by dense note-taking and an immediate transformation of the notes into the actual protocol.
- A two-stage coding process (based on Grounded Theory) was used to analyze the data. At first, a comparatively simple and formal coding system was applied to identify text sequences. In a second analytic step, these sequences were then condensed into theoretical statements.

These decisions very much defined the ways in which the concrete IED was observed by the researchers of the Vienna Project.

3.2. The Interreligious Encounter Day

The IED under analysis largely followed Katja Boehme's concept (as presented in the previous section). It was carried out as a project day in the summer semester of 2019 with pupils in the 9th grade of a Viennese grammar school (for more detailed information, see Garcia Sobreira-Majer et al. 2023). In total, around 60 pupils from classes 5b and 5c (all aged between 14 and 17) took part in this specific IED. This group included pupils from five different Religious Education classes as well as pupils from an Ethics Education class:

- Alevi Religious Education: 8 (including students from other classes and schools)
- Ethics Education: 16
- Protestant Religious Education: 6 (including students from 10th grade)
- Islamic Religious Education: 12
- Orthodox Religious Education: 10
- Roman Catholic Religious Education: 13

The teachers chose 'holidays' as the theme of the IED. This very much follows Boehme's concept of an IED and has far-reaching consequences for the social setting of the IED. In this case, the teachers jointly agreed how these holidays would be split between the individual classes. First of all, the teachers selected those holidays to which the pupils were assumed to have a personal connection. In addition, the aim was to avoid different classes dealing with the same religious holiday. This led to the following selection:

- Alevi Religious Education: Hıdırellez festival
- Ethics Education: Halloween and Valentine's Day
- Protestant Religious Education: Good Friday and Reformation Day
- Islamic Religious Education: Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr
- Orthodox Religious Education: Easter
- Roman Catholic Religious Education: Advent, St. Nicholas and Christmas

In total, the research team documented the following: one lesson of the complete 5b and 5c; two to four preparatory lessons; and the whole IED, as well as one school lesson of discussion and one school lesson of reflection. This applied to Religious Education as well as Ethics Education—whereby one has to take into account that Ethics Education still holds a peculiar position within the Austrian school system.

3.3. Ethics Education within the Context of the IED

In Austria, Ethics Education is a comparatively recent phenomenon and must be understood historically in the context of Religious Education. At the latest since the Counter-Reformation (16th and 17th centuries) and the relatively short episode of neo-absolutism (during the mid-19th century under the young Emperor Franz Joseph I), Austrian churches have begun to occupy a comparatively strong position in the Austrian school system. The central point of reference was, (and still is), the so-called 'Second Concordat', which was concluded between the Austrofascists and the Holy See in 1933, and recertified by the Republic of Austria in 1957. It still serves—at least implicitly—as a point of reference for legislation on religious education (Lehmann 2023b).

This is significant to the present day because the rights and obligations formulated in 1933/1957 were transferred to the other legally recognized religious communities in Austria. This is a complex story that cannot be presented here (Lehmann 2023b). In nuce, it led to the situation where there are currently eight Religious Education classes on offer at state schools (in alphabetical order): Alevi, Buddhist, Catholic, Free Churches, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox and Protestant.

This is the concrete context within which Ethics Education (EE) was established relatively late in 2021. At the moment, EE classes are based on a philosophical approach to ethics, and have to be provided for pupils in upper secondary education (Bucher 2014; Göllner 2002). The respective passage in the regulations of the curricula for institutions of higher education reads as follows:

"Ethics lessons are committed to fundamental human rights and freedoms. They are aimed at reasoned argumentation and reflection with regard to questions of ethics and morality.

Ethics lessons should enable pupils to reflect independently on how to shape their lives successfully, provide them with guidance and lead them to a well-founded discussion of fundamental questions about their own existence and coexistence.

By engaging with different philosophical, ideological, cultural and religious traditions and concepts of humanity, ethics lessons contribute to personal devel-

opment. The aim is to strengthen the pupils' ability and willingness to respect human dignity, to take responsibility for their own lives and actions as well as for peaceful coexistence and to practice an attitude of tolerance and openness." (Republic of Austria 2021, p. 2—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

In the school under analysis, the EE courses had started before 2021, because the school took part in the pilot phase for the introduction of EE in Austria; cooperation between Ethics Education and Religious Education had already been well established at this particular school. The EE class itself consisted of 16 pupils. Most of the pupils were without formal religious affiliation. There were, however, also students that described themselves as a Seventh Day Adventist, a Sikh, a Jehovah's Witness, as well as a Muslim. In the first three cases, the respective Religious Education is not offered at Austrian schools. In the Muslim case, the respective pupil did not want to attend the existing classes for Muslim Religious Education.

4. Ethics Education and Interreligious Encounter Learning at a School in Vienna

The Vienna Project produced dense material on the role of Ethics Education within the IED-context. Of course, this material cannot be representative in any way—neither for the school in question nor for Austria let alone other national contexts. The data does, however, document a fascinating array of different practical approaches to Interreligious Encounter Learning—on the side of the pupils as well as on the side of the teachers. Some of the teachers were, for example, rather directive whereas others were more process oriented and encouraged the input of pupils. The protocols of pupil interactions also document a wide spectrum of participation—from a high degree of passiveness to an equally high degree of commitment (Garcia Sobreira-Majer et al. 2023).

The data on the Ethics Education class (or more precisely: the data on the focus pupil from the EE class) were generated at several points in the project: it came from the preparation and reflection phases (within the context of the Ethics Education class); the presentation and exchange phases (within the mixed groups that were formed for those phases); as well as from the one lesson together as a class that was not directly linked to the IED. The following sections present selected sequences from this data set to cover two topics: first, the data on ethics education will be used to better understand the interactions that took place within the context of the IED in general (Section 4.1). Second, the data will be used to explicate the specific role of ethics education within this broader context (Section 4.2).

4.1. Typical Interactions in the Context of the IED

To understand the typical rationale of interaction within the context of the IED, it is at first interesting to have a closer look at the focus pupil (Eth_FPf) and her initial reaction to the topic of the IED (i.e., 'holidays'), right at the beginning of the preparatory phase. After a number of technical remarks, the Ethics Education teacher introduced the topic of the IED to the pupils, and told his students that the EE class will focus on Valentine's Day and Halloween. In this context, the focus pupil presented herself as what might be characterized as a 'practicing Halloweenist'. In other words, she described a commitment to clearly defined rituals she used to perform on Halloween:

> "**Eth_FPf describes her Halloween practice** as a sequence of points that she seems to practice "over and over again". The following is mainly a list, which I reproduce in fragments made up of several quotations:
>
> "First thing we do after we get up is make pumpkin faces." "Then I dress up." "Every year we always watch the same movie 'Nightmare before Christmas." "I'm going to pick up my cousin." "Then we knock on doors for trick-or-treats." "In the evening we watch horror movies." "I'll wake up my mother at midnight."

> *These are the cornerstones of a dense description of Eth_FPf's Halloween practice. She seems to actually celebrate Halloween as a ritualized holiday. In her own narrative, she is initially concerned with the ritual aspect. I (or we—her cousin and her mother) do it that way.*
>
> *This practice is presented unproblematically. It does not seem to require any further legitimization. It is not fundamentally questioned neither by the EE teacher nor by other pupils."* (Ethics Class_1, p. 8—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

At first, this quotation illustrates a characteristic feature of the way protocols were formulated and formatted for the Vienna Project. First, they were formatted in a way that helps to grasp the structure of the protocol (the sections of the text in bold). Second, the protocols intentionally include ad hoc interpretations (the sections of indented text in italics). These initial interpretations guided the observations of the researchers compiling the protocols. So, references to these ad hoc interpretations support a methodically sound approach to the data. In addition, some of these initial interpretations were crucial for the analysis of the respective sequences.

It is important to note that the preceding sequence led to an extensive exchange in the EE class that lasted for approx. 10 min. Some of Eth_FPf's class mates obviously wanted to learn more about her Halloween practices. Other pupils described their own perceptions of Halloween—and later, also Valentine's Day. This is inter alia documented in the following sequence:

> "**The pupil Eth_9m comments: "You celebrate Halloween by dressing up.**" In addition, he comments that one might also celebrate Halloween Parties. He himself would do neither of both.
>
> *As far as our research project is concerned, it is interesting to see that Eth_9m generalizes Eth_FPf's statement. This documents the perception that Halloween has fundamental characteristics that can be generalized.*
>
> In response to this interaction, the EE teacher asks Eth_9m: "Would you please share with us why you don't do it like Eth_FPf?" Eth_9m responds: "I don't believe in this." Three other pupils support this opinion." (Ethics Class_1, p. 10—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

The above sequences are of twofold significance for the present argument: on the one hand, they show that it would be misleading to define Ethics Education classes as exclusively secular. Using a wide concept of religion, the previous sequences could even be described as 'confessions of Halloweenist beliefs and practices'. On the other hand, the previous quotations document to what extent the format of the IED triggers a particular mode of self-presentation—and this even within the context of EE classes on a topic such as Halloween. The topic was introduced in a situation in which Eth_FPf felt inclined to outline her practice of Halloween at considerable length, and the reactions to this presentation propose that this was the first time the pupils had this type of conversation.

This stresses two significant dimensions of the interaction within the context of the IED. First, this format produces particular statements on religion. Second, even if those statements are formulated in a personal manner, they trigger generalized discussion, and this helps to better understand the specific role of Ethics Education within the context of the IED.

4.2. Specific Role of Ethics Education

At this point of the analysis, it once again makes sense to start with two sequences that document the introduction of the topic of holidays at the beginning of the preparation-phase. This time, however, the analyses will not concentrate on the focus pupil. They will rather deal with the pupils' overall reactions to the EE teacher's invitation to prepare Halloween and Valentine's Day as the topics of the IED.

> ""**Now we are starting to prepare for the Encounter Day.**" The Ethics Education teacher emphasizes that preparation is important. The teachers have already chosen two holidays: Valentine's Day and Halloween. These should be presented properly at the IED.
>
> *The selection of these two holidays seems to me to be highly significant in terms of our research question. International Workers' Day was not chosen as a holiday that would have a decidedly ideological connotation. Valentine's Day and Halloween are festivals that are only weakly ideologically framed.*
>
> *It is also interesting that the EE teacher establishes a connection between the two holidays and the identity of the class as an Ethics Education class. This implies that these holidays are important for the EE class.—It is, however, very likely that Christmas would have been a festival that is far more significant for the majority of pupils.*" (Ethics Class_1, p. 5—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

This sequence triggered an immediate ad hoc interpretation by the scholar who compiled the protocol. In his interpretation he tried to explicate the choice of Valentine's Day and Halloween as the holidays of the EE class. This reflects on the particular role attributed to Ethics Education within the context of the IED. The EE teacher's presentation of the decision follows a very specific rationale: Halloween and Valentine's Day were chosen parallel to religious holidays. They were not chosen in competition with those holidays—at least not within the context of the IED.

After this announcement, the EE teacher asked the pupils to form a circle of chairs and discussed a few practical things with the pupils—such as the use of an electronic class book for preparatory cooperation among the EE pupils. After this, the class returned to the task the teacher introduced just a few minutes earlier. The following quotation protocols this sequence in which the pupils discuss the choice of the holidays:

> "**The teacher then continues: "The first task is** to write down how you celebrate Valentine's Day and Halloween." Some pupils immediately start writing. [. . .]
>
> **After the task has been formulated, the teacher walks around the class. Some pupils address questions directly to him**. The EE teacher answers the questions in such a way that I can also hear his answers: "What should I do if I don't celebrate the festivals?" The EE teacher answers that the pupils should then describe how the holidays are celebrated in Austria or how they are celebrated in their respective country of origin.
>
> After further questions, the EE teacher says that one could also describe what can be observed at those holidays in shopping centers. A pupil asks whether she could also describe how she celebrated Halloween at elementary school. The EE teacher answers: "Yes, very well." He adds that it is also possible to write down why these holidays are not celebrated or how they are celebrated." (Ethics Class_1, p. 6f—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

This sequence illustrates clearly how some pupils question the selection of the holidays due to their own lack of practice. It also refers to various other dimensions of uncertainty about the choice of 'holidays' as a topic for the IED (e.g., lack of knowledge). And this runs like a common thread through all the later EE-related protocols from the IED. It would be easy to present a wide variety of comparable sequences from the preparatory phase in which the EE pupils continue to question the selection of these two holidays and address the fact that they do not actually see them as 'their holidays' (Ethics Class_1, p. 10; Ethics Class_2, pp. 9 + 13; Ethics Class_3, p. 9).

This pinpoints the particular rationale of Ethics Education within the context of the IED. On the one hand, the pupils see themselves in a position where they have to present something similar to religious holidays. On the other hand, they express discomfort and

uncertainty with this very situation. And this dilemma carries on from the preparation phase into the presentation phase. To clarify this point, it is once again helpful to focus on Eth_FPf. The respective protocol (Ethics_IED) documents two types of interaction between her and the other pupils/teachers during the IED:

1. Eth_FPf acts well within the boundaries of the IED. She presents her own Halloween activities in a way that is parallel to most of the other activities presented at the IED.
2. Eth_FPf follows a particular rationale different from the rationale of the Religious Education classes. There are sequences within the protocol that document how Eth_FPf's actions challenge the boundaries of the IED.

The following sequence is taken from the protocol of Eth_FPf's presentation during the IED. It stands for the first of these two types of interaction. Eth_FPf presents Halloween as a holiday such as Hıdırellez, Reformation Day or Eid al-Fitr:

> "**Then Eth_FPf gets up** and starts talking about Halloween. […] Like Eth_3f, she had made markings [in the EE teacher's background paper that serves as a point of reference for the presentations]. Eth_FPf presents that Halloween is initially something like All Saints' Day or the *'Dias de los Muertos'*. People often dress up on Halloween. She points to herself and says: "I'm supposed to be a Werecat, for example. These are the modern witches of the 21st century."
>
> *This formulation is significant with regard to the construction of authenticity. Eth_FPf inserts herself into the context of Halloween. At the same time, however, the previous sequence emphasizes the aspect of disguise. Eth_FPf 'is' not a Werecat, but 'she is supposed to be' a Werecat. At the same time, she emphasizes the current deviant meaning of her disguise ('witch of the 21st century').*
>
> "**In the US, up to 100 million Dollars are spent to decorate houses on Halloween**," Eth_FPf continues. She says that it is basically about protecting the houses from evil spirits and scaring the ghosts away." (Ethics_IED, p. 14f—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

This presentation did not trigger any further irritation. Immediately after this sequence Eth_FPf invited the other pupils to ask questions. One other pupil just commented on her disguise as a Werecat without asking an actual question. Another pupil mentioned the notion of 'ghosts' as an immediate association with Halloween. Once again this did not lead to any form of discussion or exchange. Those two reactions rather document to what an extent Eth_FPf's statement was well perceived within the boundaries of the IED as a presentation of a particular holiday.

The upcoming two quotations document the second type of interaction between Eth_FPf and the other pupils during the IED. They show how EE can follow a particular rationale different from the rationale of the Religious Education classes. At this point it is possible to distinguish between two different modes. In the following sequence, EE's specific approach is not questioned by the other actors at the IED. At the end of the EE pupil's entire presentation, Eth_3f invited the pupils to use the Kahoot!—a computer program that works more or less like a quiz show. The Kahoot! presents questions to the group that need to be answered by individual pupils.

Before Eth_3f was inclined to start the Kahoot!, a Muslim pupil asked a question concerning the Halloween practice of "trick or treat":

> "**Before they start the Kahoot! one of the Muslim pupils comes forward** and says that she has one more question: "What's the deal with 'trick or treat'. Isn't that what they say on Halloween? What does it mean?" Eth_FPf replies that it has to do with the early followers of Christ. They went from door to door with soul cakes. This tradition was then lost over time and only re-emerged later in America. Sour means that you don't get such a soul cake and sweet means that

you have received one.". (Ethics_IED, p. 16—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

Eth_FPf answers that question in a way that points beyond the religious framework. She answers in a detached, 'historiographic' way by at first referring to a presumed root of the 'trick or treat' practice (the tradition of the so-called soul or soulmass cake). She then describes that this tradition had been re-introduced into American society. Finally, Eth_FPf argues that from this point of view, 'sour' means that a person has not received such a soul cake, whereas 'sweet' means that the person has received the cake. And this historiographic interpretation was readily accepted by the Muslim pupil within the IED context. At least she did not ask for any clarification.

There are, however, also sequences in the IED's protocol that show that EE's particular rationale is not (or only to a limited degree) accepted by other actors in the context of the IED. Ethics Education is widely constructed in parallel to Religious Education. Within the IED there is almost no room for a distinct approach that is characteristic of EE. This became particularly clear in a sequence taken from the first reflection phase. In the run-up to the following sequence, the pupils were asked to write questions on pieces of paper in different colors, each of which was attributed to one of the participating classes. In the case of the Eth_FPf, this phase was moderated by the Orthodox Religion (OR) teacher. This teacher read a question formulated by Eth_FPf that led to the following sequence:

> "**Then the OR teacher takes a piece of paper with a question for Islam**. He reads out: "How can you believe in God even though you don't know if he exists?" Islam_9f answers: In her opinion, there must be something that created everything. Eth_FPf then asks what she thinks about what is taught in biology lessons, such as the Big Bang. Islam_9f says that she does learn such things, but that she doesn't believe in them.

> Here, the Muslim pupil clearly positions herself in contrast to content that she construes as scientifically secular.

> **Eth_FPf replies that she is fascinated by how people can believe in something despite scientific evidence to the contrary**. At this point, the OR teacher interjects that science cannot explain anything. Rather, it is about a specific logic of looking at the world. Islam_9w says: "Yes."" (Ethics_IED, p. 33—translation by the author with the help of https://www.deepl.com/translator (accessed on 16 December 2023))

This sequence is significant in two respects: first, Eth_FPf poses a question that documents the specific nature of the EE approach to religion, insofar as it points beyond the religious framework. Islam_9f provides an answer to this question that shows how she distinguishes between the logic of religion and the logic of school and how she implements this in her actual school practice. In other words: the sequence documents the different rationales at work during the IED.

Second, the OR teacher reacts to this situation in a very particular way. In the final comment of this sequence, he emphasizes the inherent logic of religion and thus supports Islam_9w's answer. This can be interpreted along the lines of the second mode of the integration of an EE perspective into the IED that has been mentioned above. The OR teacher seems to 'contain' Eth_FPf's perspective within the framework of the IED. It thus becomes clear to what an extent the IED can be shaped by a religious reading of religion— even though this is not necessarily dominant. This finally forms the basis for the concluding remarks on the concept of interreligious education at school.

5. Concluding Remarks

To assess the results of the present article one has for a start to keep two things in mind: first, this article is very much embedded into the particular situation of Religious and Ethics Education in Austria. The analyses of the Vienna Project are fundamentally structured by a situation in Austria that is distinct from the situation in other countries.

The historic approach to religious education that is typical for the Austrian case is largely unacceptable in countries such as France or the United States of America. Future research of interreligious educational formats needs to keep this comparative dimension into account, in order to properly assess its respective research results.

Second, the Vienna Project has been very consistent in using a participant observation design. In this respect it sees itself in a particular tradition of social scientific research that is currently gaining momentum in the field of education. This approach limits the scope of the analyses in as far as it focuses primarily on modes of social interaction. At the same time, the preceding analyses suggest that participant observation is a productive method that offers many advantages, especially in comparison with ex post surveys. The dense material it produces helps to understand the particular rationales of the educational settings in question.

Having said this, it makes sense to come back to the threefold argument that has been presented in the introduction to this article. The above analyses differentiate this argument:

- First, the Interreligous Encounter Day that was observed in the summer semester of 2019 at this particular secondary school in Vienna, opened up a space to make religion a subject of discussion at school. The protocols document quite dense sequences of interaction that were explicitly framed in a religious manner. This corresponds to the intentions of those scholar–practitioners that have so far developed and refined the IED format (Boehme 2021; Garcia Sobreira-Majer et al. 2014; Schambeck 2013). The Interreligious Encounter Day can successfully trigger interaction with regards to religion in a setting prone to exchange. In this respect it creates a particular form of religious setting in the school context.

- Second, religion is—within the context of the IED—constructed in a very specific way that can be described as 'school religion'. The notion of 'school religion' is controversially debated among religious educators (see: Liljestrand 2018). The data from the Vienna Project illustrate that most constructions of religion documented within the context of the project followed the rationale of presentation and assessment. The IED format has only rarely produced interactions that were so personalized and dense that it makes sense to describe them as "authentic". And this is not surprising as long as pupils tend to perform what Breidenstein calls the "job of a pupil" (Breidenstein 2006). In this respect the Vienna Project rather supports those strands of research that propose that interreligious formats tend to produce their own types of religion (Klinkhammer et al. 2011). This is particularly true within densely regulated contexts such as schools. That is the reason why it seems appropriate to apply the notion of 'school religion' to what happens within the context of the IED.

- Third, the observed IED-format has the tendency to prioritize specific constructions of religion—especially those embedded into theology. The data presented in this article have focused on ethical education and the respective focus pupil. They are, however, not restricted to EE, because they have always analyzed interactions within the wider context of the IED format. These data have shown that Ethics Education follows its own dynamics with regards to the overall IED. On the one hand, the interactions of the focus pupil were based upon general pedagogical orientations. On the other hand, they were influenced by the practices of the concrete EE teacher (Alberts et al. 2023; Bleisch and Bietenhard 2018). In this respect, the data have shown overlaps between EE and RE. These were at least partly generated by the fact that EE was part of the IED. These overlaps also existed independently—for example, in relation to religious plurality in the EE class, or to the personalities of the pupils (and teachers).

To put it in a nutshell, the previous analyses come to an ambivalent conclusion. First, they present the potentials as well as the restrictions of interreligious formats within the school context. Second, they underline the specific potential of EE within the context of the IED, as well as the tendency to contain this potential. And this gives rise to a number of interesting further questions: what might be the potential of collaborations such as the one protocolled here? What is the impact on the teaching objectives? What does this mean

for the further development of religion-related teaching in Austria—and possibly beyond? There is a need to answer these questions in international comparative research in order to properly deal with religious plurality at school.

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