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## **Funding Application to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research**

### **Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies (ReDi).**

Interdisciplinary and Internationally Comparative Studies on the  
Possibilities and Limitations of Interreligious Dialogue.

**Duration:** 5 years (1 February 2013 – 31 January 2018)

**Applicant:** Hamburg University

**Department Responsible:** Academy of World Religions at Hamburg University

**Head of Project:** Prof. Wolfram Weisse

**Deputy Heads:** Prof. Katajun Amirpur, Dr. Anna Körs, Dr. Dörthe Vieregge

**Abstract**

## Summary

The growing religious pluralisation of modern societies has placed the question of religions and dialogue at the centre of public attention, with great expectations for the peaceful coexistence of people from different faiths and cultures tied to it. Yet research on questions of interreligious dialogue remains in its infancy throughout the various disciplines engaged in it. This project seeks to contribute materially to remedying this deficit by a simultaneous study of interreligious dialogue at two levels:

1: That of dialogical theology. Considering extant approaches of plural, intercultural and especially interreligious theology, a team of experts from different religious traditions will develop a dialogical theology. The context-oriented nature of our research will mean that this must refer strongly to observed forms of actual interreligious dialogue in real life, which will be studied at the second level.

2: That of dialogical practice. By applying methods of empirical sociology, we will study the belief about and practice of interreligious dialogue as it exists today. Our surveys will include both actors inside of religious communities and those unaffiliated with them. Theological conceptions of religious pluralism that are rooted in the everyday experience of these actors will also be an important focus of our work. Further, the possibilities and limitations of fostering interreligious dialogue especially in education will be studied in depth.

Our research will be internationally comparative, focusing on several metropolitan regions in Europe. Beyond its home base in Hamburg, the Rhine-Ruhr region in Germany will be studied. Internationally, surveys will also be carried out in Scandinavia, focusing on the cities of Oslo and Stockholm, and in London.

## Overall Aim and Research Objectives

The core project titled „Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies“ (ReDi) is designed as practice-oriented research addressing the fundamental questions of interreligious dialogue both regarding its possibilities and limitations. Its interdisciplinary approach including theology (and the humanities in general) along with social science and education has been chosen to study complex phenomena of interreligious dialogical activity with regard to their impact on social processes of integration and peacemaking and thus gain practically applicable insight for their realisation.

At the first level of dialogical theology, our project intends to identify and explore the potentials and limitations to dialogue in different religious traditions in order to base an open, dialogical theology on extant approaches of openness to pluralism. This work will be undertaken by a team of experts from different religious traditions including Hamburg-based researchers and cooperation partners from both within Germany and abroad. The dialogical theology thus developed will refer back to empirical findings by integrating theological conceptions of laypeople, especially young people, rooted in the everyday experience of religious pluralism and

living dialogical practice. A further aspect will be to study what impulses interreligious dialogue may gain by integrating gendered perspectives.

At the second level of research, that of dialogical practice, the project will deploy empirical surveys to gauge the possibilities and limitations of living dialogue between people from different religious and cultural backgrounds and to study the forms, functions and potentials of dialogical practices. In this effort, two fields will be in primary focus. On the one hand, we will study the practices, theology (academic and lay) and beliefs of religious communities and organisations as well as their ties and interactions both amongst each other secular actors (e.g. public authorities, politicians, NGOs, associations and other members of civil society). On the other, the broad field of religious education, both scholastic and extramural, will be studied with a view to the possibilities and limitations it has for fostering interreligious understanding.

While the main focus of our project is on dialogue between religions (or religious actors), it also encompasses dialogue within a given religious tradition as well as that between religious and secular actors. The term „interreligious dialogue“ must thus in the following be understood to embrace all three forms of dialogue. Its initial understanding remains deliberately heuristic, and no final definition is attempted at the outset. Rather, it is the task of our research work to understand interreligious dialogue in its fundamental preconditions, applications and functions through interdisciplinary and complementary approaches and thus to contribute to a better understanding of the concept.

As interreligious dialogue always occurs within a specific context whose religious, political and socioeconomic conditions, societal discourses and other local factors shape it, this contextual dependence will also be taken into account. We will carry out our research as an internationally comparative study whose horizon extends beyond Hamburg to other European metropolitan regions.

## **Relation to Goals of Funding**

In Germany, the public discourse on religious pluralism mostly focuses on Islam, usually viewed as a single entity and referred to as „*der Islam*“ with a definite article. Its predominance is defended by pointing to over four million Muslims living in Germany and their justified calls for greater recognition and participation in public affairs. For example, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research has been supporting the introduction of Islamic Studies or Islamic Theology as a subject taught at public universities based on recommendations of the German Science Council.

The current – and even more so future – situation in Germany will have to take account not only of Christian and Muslim theologies, though, but also of a growing number of other faiths, an increasing intrareligious differentiation into separate traditions or confessions, and individualised forms of religiosity and spirituality that defy traditional religious affiliation. Developing an analytical perspective on religious pluralism and the relations between people from different religious traditions or belief systems thus is a vital task for academia and socie-

ty at large. That is what our project intends to do, thus taking up suggestions by the German Science Council made in 2010 regarding the further development of theology and religious studies.

Its two central perspectives exemplify the unique position that Hamburg University's Academy of World Religions has in German academia. The approach is deliberately dialogue-oriented, focusing not only on a coexistence of different religions, but on the interaction between them, especially with a view to extant dialogue orientation and future potential. Also, it integrates religions beyond Christianity and Islam, namely Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Alevism while also taking into account the perspective of the religiously unaffiliated and people or groups whose positions on religious questions are socially relevant, but underresearched (Berger 2011). Thus, the Academy's research profile matches the central characteristics of the religious landscape in Germany and other European countries: pluralism, internal differentiation, individualisation and secularisation (Joas 2012). In this context it must be pointed out, though, that the latter aspect tends to be overestimated in its importance and that we can expect growing religiosity, or at least interest in religion, in Western Europe as well as the rest of the world.