



Spirals of dialogue

Research in religious communities



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Researchers become the researched

In order to explore possible ways of teaching about interreligious awareness we designed a series of projects entitled 'Spirals of Dialogue'. Students were required to visit a religious community as researchers, and produce a 'work of art' in a genre of their choice, in addition to the customary written essay. Along with being an instrument of self-reflection, the emphasis on art was to send a signal to researcher and researched about the subjectivity interpretation. The art would also offer an accessible venue for members of the community to voice their opinions about how they were being understood, and engage critically with these outsider perceptions. The project began in a Turkish Alevi congregation in Hamburg. After participant observation over two months, the students were ready to present their work in a seminar at the university, to which members of the Alevi community had been invited. Seventeen community members attended, together with the nineteen students. As an ice-breaker, but also as a means of reflection, eight photographs were presented for discussion in small groups. These were from the congregation's own extensive digital collection, depicting scenes with students present. The task for the small groups in the seminar was to assign speech and thought balloons to the different people in the photograph. With humour, irony and a degree of social insight, the mixed groups went about their task.





In one of the photographs there is a student, on invitation, actually participating in the ritual of lighting three candles which signals the start of a traditional *cem* ceremony. The first is lit while pronouncing the word 'Allah', the second with 'Mohammed', and the third with 'Ali'. Afterwards, however, she had had serious doubts about her involvement in the ritual, because it seemed to her that she had affirmed beliefs which she felt were foreign to her as a Christian. Some of the other participants knew about her concerns, and this might be the reason for what seems to be an effort at dealing with an uncomfortable situation. As she lights the candle the bubble has her thinking "If only they know how many places I have set alight!". One of the older women, seated in front with a concerned look on her face, is thinking, "I hope we are insured!". In this, and in other pictures, inattentive participants are rewarded with snoring signs or thoughts about lunch. In the next picture the student is deep in thoughts, she is thinking: "Unless I get coffee, I will not eat!".



These were often serious and half-serious attempts at guessing what a person might have been thinking or feeling at that moment. What was initially an exercise in group integration became a means of speaking about difficult issues, and served to underline the diversity of ways in which different people might interpret the same religious symbol. In ethnographic research this recognition of plural perceptions is called 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). When researchers affirm such a democratisation of meaning, it may stimulate some debate about authority. Even in a congregation like the Alevi, which takes pride in the fluidity of its tradition, the presence of researchers can upset the balance. The language of the congregational life is Turkish, but due to their need to establish their identity in Germany, it is the younger

members who speak fluent German who receive greater prominence. The debate about authoritative description is brought to the surface in two of the reflection pictures. In the one blow, an older member looking on is thinking: "Why does Ali always have to talk". At the same time the younger man is saying: "Here you can learn everything about Alevi religion!" In another reworked photograph, there is a woman with a horrified look on her face, probably precipitated by a camera flash, and she is depicted as thinking: "What is he saying there?". That they were able to raise such sensitive issues, says something for the quality of the interaction between the visitors and their hosts.





Interpretation did not stop there. The pictures, along with title and explanatory texts from the artists, were then placed in an online chat room to which students and members of the congregation had access. This meant that there could be many more interpretations and interpretations of interpretations. The entire project was structured to reinforce the point that interpretations are never final. Dialogue amongst interpreters as well as with the interpreted is therefore a very necessary activity.

Hermeneutics is the analysis of what happens when we interpret a phenomenon. By means of empathetic imagination one seeks to enter the horizon of someone else. At the same time, through this new encounter, the interpreter becomes increasingly aware of her or his own horizon, through recognising earlier misunderstandings. In order to establish the point that understanding is an ongoing process, the image of a 'hermeneutical circle' came to be used (Gadamer 1988). A better choice might have been 'hermeneutical spiral' as this suggests a progressive broadening of interpretation. Knowledge is situated, incomplete, and therefore always tentative. Ethnocentrism and reductionism cannot be avoided, but a degree of critical awareness can improve the scientific quality of research. Interpretation must include viewing the otherness of oneself. The researchers then become themselves the most important research tool.



The aim may be to arrive at greater accuracy about what one happens to be researching. At the same time there remains an element of mystery. One of the striking features of ritual is its capacity to bewilder; something which can, at worst, lead to a strengthening of negative stereotypes. As a means of dealing with this emotionally unsettling state of half-knowing, the idea of arts-based inquiry has a growing following (McIntosh/Warren 2013). Artistic activity provides a place to pause, to explore, and to play with paradox. There are different kinds of thinking that might be encouraged: imaginative, emotional, as well as theoretical (Cassirer 1969). The art form can serve as a means of abstraction, but needs also to be seen in relation to the languages of emotion and reason.



Art as research

Both art and religion are seen to be venues where it is seen as appropriate to engage with the big questions of our common human existence. Adopting the role of artist does not mean that one is expected to produce grand art, but it does mean doing the best one can. As in all artistic work, motivation may be mixed. The effort invested could be to score a good grade or to please a buyer, but it can also

The Parable of the Bee

"Imagine that Alevi faith is like a bee that gathers nectar from various flowers to make honey. It seeks out the most beautiful and aromatic flowers with the most delicious nectar. This is exactly how it is amongst the Alevi. Only the most valuable aspects are gathered from the different religions, for example from Christianity, Islam and Buddhism."

Hasan Sinsek

"We had the idea of producing a 'Wimmelbild', a complex composition teeming with hidden objects. Characteristic for such picture puzzles is that a legend in small print is included in the margin to guide the seek and find exercise. The religious symbols were in our case chosen from Christianity and Alevi religion, both of which are made up of a number of dimensions. The artistic genre of a 'Wimmelbild' we therefore considered appropriate. We also thought that this form of presentation would appeal to children who could relate to it."

Lilian Johanna Kreimann, Annemarie Sowa

be a place where significant thinking, feeling and acting occurs. The students understood their task as being to identify what is for them an important question, and then to engage with it using some form of artistic work. The art produced was on topics, which resonated for the students. It could be on something appealing or really off-putting or puzzling. What they found particularly inspiring was the egalitarianism and tolerance within the Alevi community.

Bienengleichnis (Parable of the Bee) *Lilian Johanna Kreimann, Annemarie Sowa*

Wimmelbild Legend (right):

»Trinity« - Allah / Hakk, Muhammad, Ali: in the middle right (three candles)

Trinity - Father, Son, Holy Spirit: in the center (picture on the wall)

Koran: top left corner

Bible: the lower left on the table

Saz: bottom right leaning on the chair

Organ: in the middle in the back room

Four goals - forty gates: in the lower right corner (blue door)

Ten Commandments: the top-right corner (stone tablet)

Bee: bottom left corner





Das Gemeinschaftsleben (Community)

Mareike Schultz, Carolin Sturm, Magdalena Willmann

Many of the students liked the undogmatic nature of Alevi theology, with its emphasis on music, poetry and dance. One of the research groups interviewed Hasan Sinsek, a musician in the community. He told them that he made music to celebrate life, to give people a means of expressing their deepest feelings, and in turn to benefit from their joy. Music is emotion which is made visible in dance. The *Saz* is a musical instrument, known as 'the stringed Koran'. It unites the musician and the listeners with God. Towards the end of the interview, Hasan Sinsek described the feeling he had when playing: "it is as though I am holding my small daughter in my arms and she is breathing softly against my neck". The photograph on the right, taken by the students, was while he played the melody, "My faithful friend is the earth". This they then photo-shopped together with one taken of young people dancing. The aspect they wanted to emphasize is the way in which music and dance express emotion, builds spiritual community and creates meaning.

Musik
Tanja Jung, Frederik Jentsch, Leonie Heidsieck





play an important role, even if hardly visible. The response from some members of the congregation was to point out that the images were on the floor, and particularly the one behind the dancers could be inadvertently trodden on, which could cause offense. It became an ongoing discussion, as the students worked out how best to build the suggestions into a final presentation.

Handing over the product of considerable creative effort is a token of respect and gratitude. The exhibition can be a place where artists explain their work, as well as a place where members of a religious community can respond to how they are represented in the art work. There was a lot of discussion about the photoshopped picture above. The students explained that they wanted to interpret what they saw as a dilemma in Alevi spirituality. There is the saying that: on the one hand, „the human being is regarded as the most important sacred text“, and on the other, the Koran still has a role. In the centre of the picture are dancers, dancers connected to each other, moving to a melody. In front and behind them is the Koran because it continues to



Der Wächter (The Guardian)
Tuna Sar, Jelena Minic

This picture was presented to the congregation. During their earlier visits the students had been impressed by the dignity and presence of 'The Guardian'. This was further developed when they learned that the traditional role of this man, clothed in black with a red sash around his waist, was to protect the congregation. The role brings back memories of a minority community living in fear and meeting in secret.



Towards equal status contact

The visitors to the Alevi congregation were from the majority culture, had benefited from more education, and German was their first language. According to theories of prejudice reduction, the most beneficial contact is where there is equal status and friendship potential (Pettigrew 1998). Therefore, when planning a follow-up seminar it was decided to encourage students to develop projects themselves. They would use their existing social contacts on the campus to organize visits to religious communities. The outcome was that small groups of researcher-artists were able to visit Russian Orthodox and African Pentecostal churches, as well as several mosques. However, even with the advantage of access to insiders of their own age and educational status, to help them interpret the experience, there was much that remained strange and exotic to the Protestant Christian students.

The Orthodox church with its walls golden icons, babies crying, people moving around, aroma of incense, the chanted Russian liturgy and choral singing were a new experience. For one of the student visitors there was a particular activity that attracted her attention and subsequently became the theme of her artwork 'The Confession'.

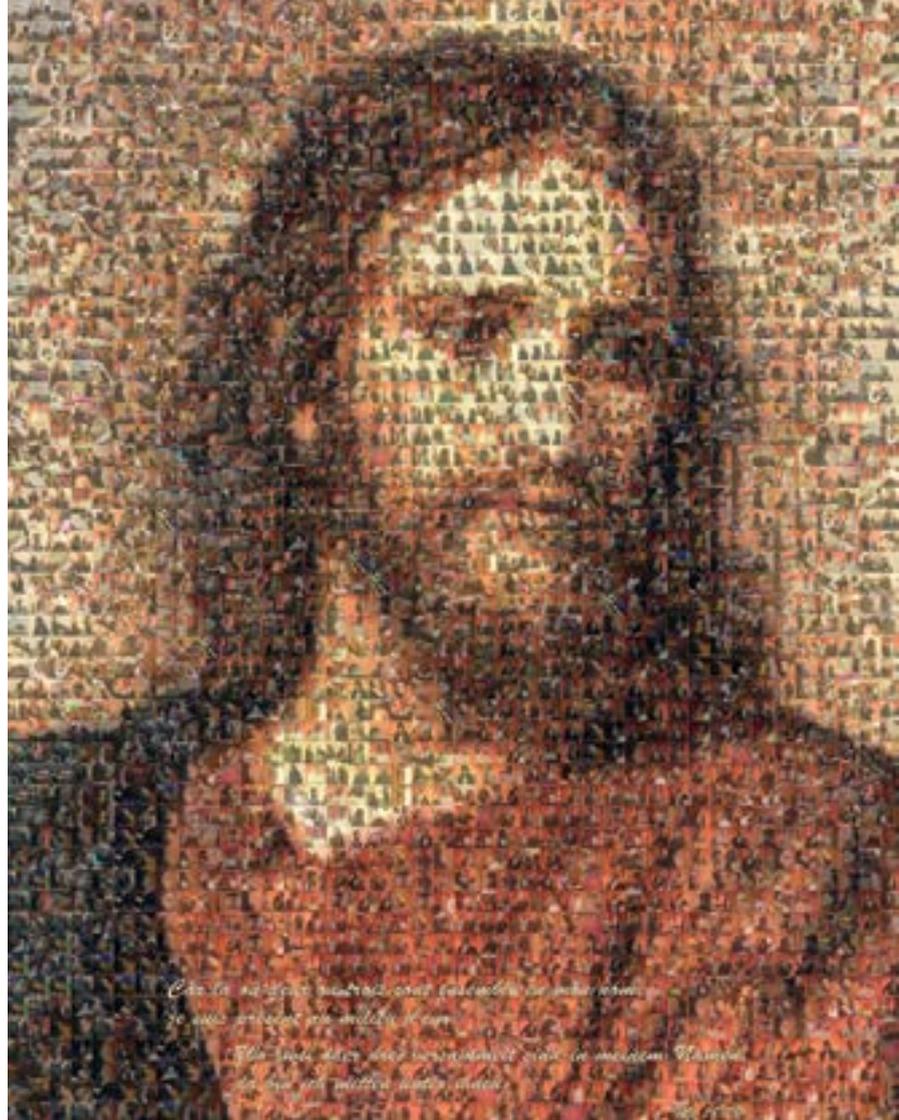
Directly after the service she made a sketch from memory. At home she prepared a canvas acrylic paints, involving hours of concentrated effort. A particular challenge, she recalls in her term paper, was to draw attention to the magnificent gold of the priest's robes. The painting also expresses the dignity and fragility of the penitent (or is it simply someone needing a blessing?).

"On the basis of its ritual sequence I concluded that it must be the sacrament of confession and absolution. This was very foreign to me as I expected something like this to take place in private or in a confessional. Here it all took place in the middle of the service. The priest stands next to a small lectern with Bible and a crucifix. A person comes up to the priest who prays for her. Then the priest speaks to the person and makes a prayer of absolution. At the end, the priest touches the head of the bowed person with his stole and blesses her."

Nadine Stürck



Die Beichte (The Confession)
Nadine Stürck



*Per la natura umana, non c'è nulla di impossibile
se non si vuole un po' di tempo.*

*Il tempo è la cosa più preziosa che abbiamo
e non si può comprare.*

For those accustomed to the reserved solemnity of Lutheran Protestantism, Pentecostal worship was a challenging experience. They were deeply impressed by the interpersonal warmth, the enthusiasm in worship with moments of spiritual intensity juxtaposed with laughter. One of the student groups spent time in a French-speaking African Pentecostal congregation. They report witnessing a sense of community reminiscent of the early church in the New Testament. Each individual is a unique, active, and valuable part of the body. The artwork is made up of many pictures taken during their visit. Each one of them is a pixel in a picture of Jesus. The picture is taken from „Christ and the Rich Young Ruler“ of Heinrich Ferdinand Hofmann, which served as an outline. It draws on the metaphor of the congregation as ‘the Body of Christ’ with each member having a unique status (1 Corinthians 12: 12-31). It took a great deal of time, and when the picture was complete, the students printed and framed it as a gesture of thanks to the congregation. It also served as the centrepiece of their report in the university seminar and in their term papers. It was *their* interpretation, and this explains the irony of a very European looking Jesus.

Jesus-Mosaik

Jana Nölle, Judith Sperling, Mirjam Wahl

Kein Titel
Sarina Lux



Several groups visiting Pentecostal churches were very impressed by the quality of the music and by the depth of devotion they encountered. The two pictures on the left were made in response to the experience in a congregation. In her term paper *Sarina Lux* relates what she attempted to capture in the coloured picture above left:

“The posture of the figure in my picture shows how the people raise their hands in worship while the music is playing. This powerful gesture made a deep impression on me while I was there. I sketched the musical notes and a cross to show the link between music and faith. Music has a significant place in Pentecostal churches because with the help of music they are able to express their worship of God. The colours yellow, orange and red I chose because they express warmth. I experienced the atmosphere in the community as very warm. We were welcomed as guests and very well treated.”

In the black-and-white picture below it the same sentiments of inclusive warmth are to be seen. However there is a small built in question mark. In top left hand corner, outside of the caring circle, are two masculine signs. During the first visit, the pastor had preached a sermon based on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In his view, homosexuals who do not repent of their ways are the prime candidates for hell.

A group of three researcher artists spent time with a group of Muslim women in the student congregation at the university. Their term paper, "The expression of femininity in Islam", describes three decisive moments. The first was the novel experience of putting on a headscarf. They were impressed by the way in which their fellow students understood it both as a statement of faith and as an expression of beauty. They were surprised at the complexity of putting it on, and also at all the possible variations of colour, design and form. The second decisive moment was when one of the students wanted to demonstrate how to bind the headscarf. To do so she needed to remove her own headscarf. They noticed what a challenge it was for her to expose herself to outsiders. "In this moment we felt that we had shifted from being strangers to becoming friends". The third moment was when they saw the photograph of themselves wearing headscarves.



"It was a very strange feeling to see ourselves in this way. Hair is a very important part of who we are, our femininity and beauty. With head covering we are reduced to our faces. This was a completely new experience, one which we would not want to miss, but one which we can hardly imagine for our daily lives".

Frederike Kafka, Nicole Kielinski, Merle Bock



A student from another group, Maria-Johanna Hilmer, recalls some of the intense emotions she experienced before, during, and after the visit.

“It is also very sad to learn that young women with headscarves fear for their own safety. This makes me sad and angry at the same time. It seems to me that informing people is an urgent priority.”

“Before the visit to the women’s group in the mosque I experienced a lot of conflicting feelings. Never in my life had I visited a mosque. I did not know what it would look like inside, and it was not clear to me how the people there would react to our visit. On the way to the mosque I was accompanied by uncertainty and doubt. But curiosity and excitement predominated in my thoughts and feelings.”

“On the way home I was overcome by feelings of relief, satisfaction, and anticipation about our planned project. The uncertainty was gone and interest in the women from the mosque was great.”

“I was very well aware of the issue of terrorism, and the way in which Islamic faith is brought into association with it. Through the conversations with the women, who shared their feelings and experiences, this theme suddenly became very personal for me. I shared their sadness and shame at these terrible deeds.”

Maria-Johanna Hilmer

Grenzerfahrungen Bordercrossings

This picture was taken during a seminar, probably at a moment when expectations about the term paper were being outlined. However, in a reflection session involving photo elicitation, a few weeks later, it became a venue to express misgivings.

In many of the reports, there are accounts of the surprise at how much the visitors had in common with people they had regarded as very

different: similar tastes in films, music, chocolate, pizza, clothing. After discussion they also found that they shared very similar human values. At the same time their accounts tell of a degree of anxiety associated with these border crossings.

Term papers offered an unambiguous academic setting, a distancing from the events, in which experience could be reflected upon in relation to available scientific literature.



Most of the participants will go on to become teachers in schools or adult educators. Very valuable is the experience of exposing oneself to situations which are rich in learning potential, and which make one vulnerable and insecure. By reflecting on such experiences, we become better equipped to operate in a diverse world and to enable others to do so. By making it possible to be both researcher and researched, guests and hosts, borders can become places of ongoing dialogue. The methods used in this and similar projects may be good social sciences and educational practice, but in the end it is simply about good manners and the pleasure of human companionship. There is for the host community opportunity to practice dealing with outsider perceptions. For the researchers, it cannot be only a matter of obtaining accurate information for a research paper, it is about enriching one's life, and ensuring that the researched community profits equally from the encounter.

Reflection is a deliberate act of stepping back in order to observe ourselves better. By becoming researchers of our own experience, we see ourselves differently and practice new ways of interpreting our situation. Learning occurs when we reflect on experience.

Dialogical research means learning about oneself, just as much as learning about others. The study of religion is a very challenging task, that requires a great deal of self-reflection. In the words of David Chidester:

“If we can learn how to think about religion, we can learn to think about anything”.

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