

Interculturality as an academic discipline

by Hamid Reza Yousefi

A foreword

Modern political and social controversies are no longer thinkable without a debate on interculturality. Some criticism on a far misleading use of the term, which is rather associated with a keyword than a precise content, is therefore not unjustified. In this case interculturality is regarded as a ›temporary fashion‹ or a ›temporary mind-set‹. However, social and cultural studies have implemented some attempts to subsume the term interculturality from various dimensions. Its origin is lead back to happenings and phenomena like the liquidation of the Soviet Union, the foreign workers movement, the wave of migration, globalization or the vastly developing communication system since the middle of the 20th century. Though these models of excuses remain incomplete, yet they refer to a central issue that interculturality is forced to deal with: artificially developed or reversed borders between ›cultures‹, which have been mainly blurred within living memory.

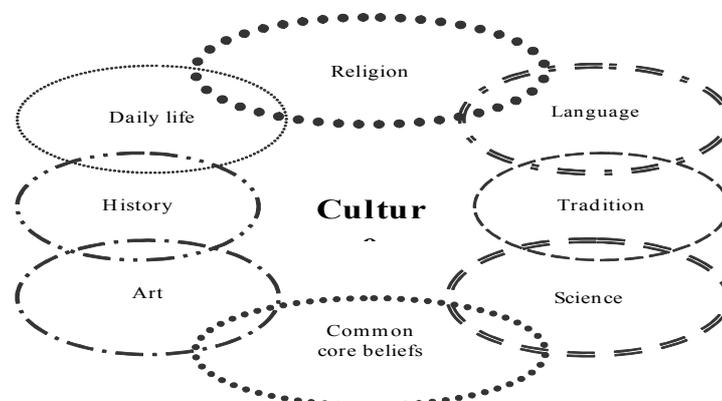
It is not my aim to discuss these and similar paradigms, but to define and substantiate interculturality as an academic discipline. In order to understand the entity of interculturality, I will firstly interrogate how at all cultures evolve and what they mean to the individual and the human cooperation.

What is that - culture?

In general cultures historically evolve mainly through religions and sciences as well as in the media of art and society. They enable a) to plan one's own behavior so that it can be understood and interpreted by other representatives of one's own or another cultural area; b) they may enable us to estimate and adequately judge the behavior of other people regardless of origin and skin color; and c) they constitute collective identities, especially through the education of cultural traditions.

Cultures in any part of the world shape humans even though they are created by human beings themselves. In this sense »every child«, according to Ghazali, »is born in its natural state (fitra). Its parents then make him become a Jew, a Christian [...]«. ¹

Each culture creates, though in different forms, social regulation frameworks and also political organizations, economical structures, moral traditions. They influence the urge of knowledge, art and the individual unfolding in all areas of human life, bearing in mind how religion can affect fine arts and architecture in a certain culture. While Christianity allows Jesus Christ to be depicted in an idealized way, Judaism and Islam impose aniconism. The following chart demonstrates the various components and circle of cultural areas, the position of man and its relation to himself and his environment:



Besides describing culture as such another question becomes important, namely in how far large scale cultures including their contexts proportionate to each other. Comparing former approaches

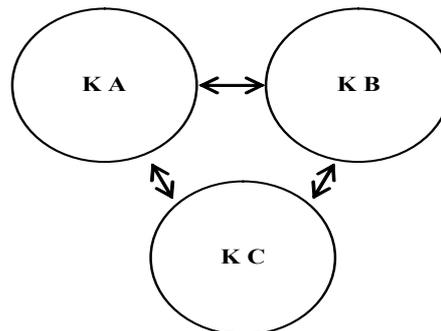
¹ Ghazali, Abu-Hamid Muhammad: *Der Erretter aus dem Irrtum*, Hamburg 1988, S. 5.

seems helpful at this point, mirroring in the existing directions of multi- and transculturality and their position to interculturality. The terms ›multi-, trans- and interculturality‹ stand for a range of heterogenic theories with differently acting implications of comparison and understanding of the subjects.²

Cultures in the model of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism assumes homogeneous cultures with ›separate units‹ resp. ›fixed systems.‹³ It therefore articulates protection and acceptance of cultural diversities. Cultures merely exist parallel and are alien to each other. The core problem herein is that the term culture is mainly translated into policies ethnically defining according to the predetermined conditions.⁴

The following illustration visualizes these models of ›parallel existing cultures‹; the letters ›A, B, C‹ may be replaced by continents, social structures, branches of science, faculties, single subjects, communions, groups, persons, thinking methods, religions, philosophies or world-views:



This thinking pattern denies the actual heterogeneity of cultures including fluent borders and insinuates a non-existing closeness.⁵ It neglects the inner liveliness and its reciprocal interaction.⁶

Cultures in the model of transculturality

Multiculturalism that assumes a total homogeneity and global form of individual cultures implies a transcultural approach with absolute boundlessness. Based on this assumption, transculturality accepts a radical relativity of values and structures, which releases everything as *equal* and as *equally good*. The combination of elements with different origin can therefore reveal an individual as transcultural.⁷ The following image shows this model of ›cultures in diffusion‹:

² Cf. Nicklas, Hans et.al.: *Theoretische Grundlagen und gesellschaftliche Praxis*, Bonn 2006. A classification of what multi-, trans- and interculturality is resp. is not, what significant value it has in theory and practice of history and presence and what consequences it has for society, science and politics has not been seriously drafted. Even intercultural philosophies discuss this topic quite casually. The following collected edition confirms my statement. Cf. Mall, Ram Adhar et.al.: *Philosophische Grundlagen der Interkulturalität*, Amsterdam 1993. The relation between interculturality and intercultural philosophy, to mention just one example, has been until now been discussed only casually.

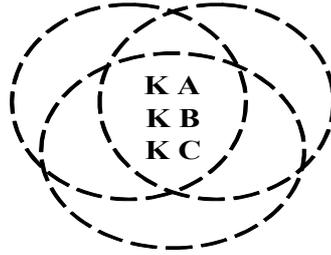
³ Cf. Taylor, Charles: *Multikulturalismus und die Politik der Anerkennung*, Frankfurt/Main 1992.

⁴ Cf. Ateş, Seyran: *Der Multikulti-Irrtum*. Wie wir in Deutschland besser zusammenleben können, Berlin 2007.

⁵ I have discussed this problem in another edition. Cf. Vgl. Yousefi, Hamid Reza und Ina Braun: *Interkulturalität*. Eine interdisziplinäre Einführung, Darmstadt 2011.

⁶ Cf. Neubert, Stefan u.a.: *Multikulturalität in der Diskussion*. Neuere Beiträge zu einem umstrittenen Konzept, Wiesbaden 2008, S. 20 f.

⁷ Cf. the transcultural approach by Wolfgang Welsch, who arguments in this direction. Welsch, Wolfgang: *Transkulturalität*. Zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung, in: *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, Heft 26, 2000 (327-351), S. 336. Cf. A similar outlook by Antor, Heinz: *Inter- und Transkulturelle Studien*. Theoretische Grundlagen und interdisziplinäre Praxis, Heidelberg 2006.



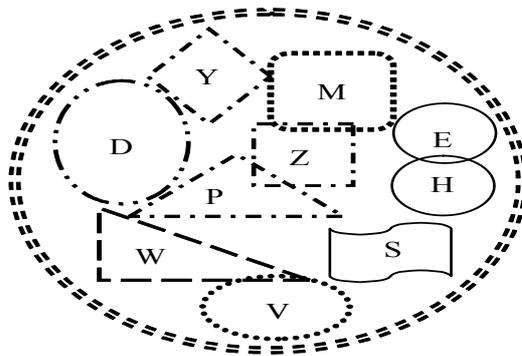
Yet, cultures do not practically merge in the way shown above; furthermore, the meaning of the individual as representative of a certain cultural area is, here also, being neglected.

In a time when the world is moving more and more together and information about a distant cultural region is accessible or forwarded in a second by a mere point and click it is *per se* no longer possible to consider cultures as ›separate units‹ with changeless attributes, like many methods of multiculturalism show, and to face the challenges with traditional methods. This also applies to the theory of transculturality that emanates from pabulum. These and similar approaches do no longer comply with the anthropology of our eon and are not retainable from an empirical viewpoint.

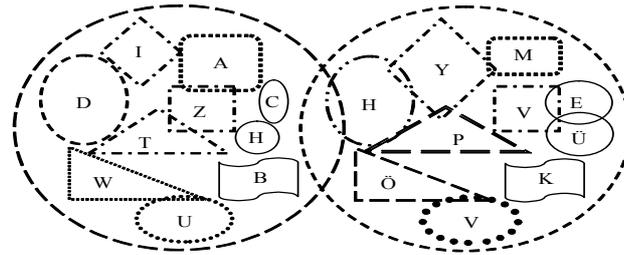
We need a new term for culture which retracts from the conception of a mere parallelism or boundless diffusion of cultures and intercedes between these two positions. The new term for culture intends to correspond to the hermeneutical situation and modified constitution of cultural contexts. In the following I will introduce interculturality in the character of this openness as an independent discipline and define its field of appliance. Herewith, I formulate as an extension to the described culture models, firstly, an exposed term of culture and, secondly, discuss the conditions, structure, methods and tasks of interculturality.

Cultures in the model of interculturality

As mentioned above, a single culture is not a ball-shaped closed static form, but it is open to other influences, furthermore lively-dynamical and modifiable. Moreover, it may not be neglected that cultures as such do not exist, but it should be kept in mind that each culture is constituted by humans that range in between different cultural contexts and somehow identify with them, sometimes more sometimes less. The illustration points it up as follows:



The internal self-reinforcing tendencies of cultural contexts are here quite obvious by the different resolutions. There are areas like E, H and S, which are delimited from the other sub-cultures in between the open large scale culture that define an independence or clarity, and still show similarities among each other. This especially applies to extreme trends concerning the comparison and understanding of cultures. The following image demonstrates the cultural understanding in the model of interculturality, in which cultures show heterogenic units that have a reciprocal relationship with all other cultures:



With such a cultural understanding I refrain from an idea of cultures as monolith shapes, which are to be *totally different* from the own culture. The consequence of this open cultural understanding is not irrelevant for the common research. It should be interrogated under which term of culture they are built and based on; where necessary the results of research of all fields of knowledge must be interculturally reviewed. It should be emphasized that the preferred concept of culture here does not replace the traditional theories paradigmatically, but corrects, completes and enhances them.

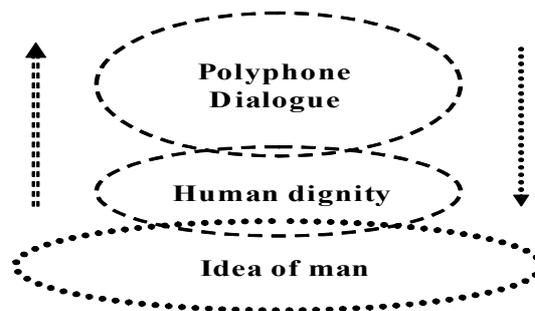
In the scope of this article the entire structure of culture is understood as an open and dynamically-changeable mind and orientation system. By mentioning ›culture‹ or ›cultures‹ in the following I refer to people that move in between different cultural contexts and that identify with them to a certain extent. This implies in how far the relations in groups and their outward relations are structured and how they can be experienced, understood and interpreted. These pre-suppositions substantiate interculturality.

What is that – interculturality?

Interculturality is mainly geared to raise different cultures and traditions with their own queries and methods of resolution from the viewpoint of their own various positions, in order to develop joint perspectives. It supports a dialogical communication between and among manifold figures of discourse in science, society and politics. As the dialog partners appear emancipated in these discourses interculturality is not linked to a name or period like the European or non-European.

A bearing pillar of interculturality is the acknowledgment of human dignity, which has its anchorage in every cultural range. Many cultures, religions and in most schools of thought the human dignity is seen as inherent and imprescriptible. However, no cultural area can claim the universality of human dignity as its own; it is in no ones exclusive possession. The different forms of breach of human dignity in theory and practice in between these cultural areas show that their maintenance and breach is ever bound to a certain idea of man. The question for human dignity and with it human rights therefore bears a theoretical and practical dimension, which should be always thought together but independent of their contexts, in order to unfold their internal problems in society, politics and science.

Interculturality, in summary, is the name of a scientific discipline with a methodological-discursive orientation that devotes to the research and implementation of the above mentioned goals. Its interdisciplinarity is characteristic, though it serves other scientific disciplines without making them ancillary sciences. The following image demonstrates the entity of interculturality: Human dignity is due to the respective idea of man:



The demands of interculturality

Like every scientific discipline interculturality has demands that are important for its theory and practice. It sees every form of absolutization of its own conception as fruitless, since the own relation to other groups is in this case exclusively defined by the own reference system.

In the scope of interculturality each form of expression and terminology arises from the notional contexts of the cultures, religions and schools of thought to be analyzed. For example, we cannot understand and explain terms of Islamic philosophies with the help of European philosophies. To understand a language it is necessary to learn its etymology, grammar and logic. The etymology, grammar and logic of the own language gives information about other language groups only to a certain extent. The same applies to all areas of the intercultural working field.

The revision of the term culture is an important requirement, which in the western-European hemisphere mostly leads back to the Latin word *cultura* and is discussed against this background. Significant examples are found in relevant standard works. To be mentioned first of all is the ›Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaft‹ (Handbook of Cultural Science) in three volumes, whose programmatic mindset is anchored in the introduction. The term culture here is derived from Latin, this etymological deduction focuses the term culture on those western-European areas that are influenced by Latin.⁸

In this and other volumes of the handbook representatives of non-European cultural regions such as Asia, Africa, Latin-America or the Orient do not have a say. Such a viewpoint, criticized as ›euro-central‹, is normatively misleading and empirically inadequate as it assumes that every culture emanates from the initially presupposed term of culture and understands the same. This also applies to many relevant reference-works used as first contact-point, which should be examined on their basic meaning of culture and adequately modified. A consequence of this lopsidedness is that students and interested laymen unknowingly pass on the deficit since they have not learnt it otherwise or are not sensitive enough to notice.

Interculturality rejects every attempt that fixes the *tertium comparationis*, the standard of comparison, exclusively in their own or a certain tradition. Accordingly, it avoids shortsightedness as well as mono-causal explications.

A further requirement of interculturality is the consistent avoidance of a euro-centric overcoming of euro-centrism, since the goal is to avoid centrism as such. Furthermore, it must be discussed upon, why we pick up and reason a problem or question, how we understand and compare a circumstance that is interculturally important to us, what methods we use and what are the goals we perceive.

Interculturality of the mentioned human dignity also results from the conceptual contexts of each culture, religion and school of thought considering their context.

Method of interculturality

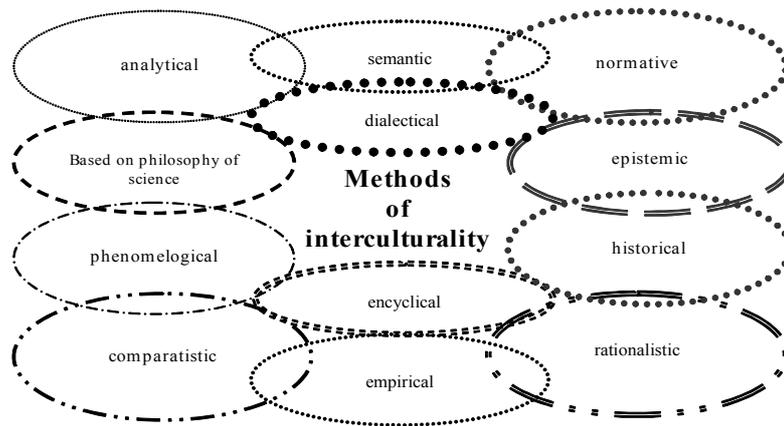
Professionalizing interculturality to an academic subject implies an elementary plurality of methods and theories. This discipline differentiates from common disciplines because it is not restricted to a special field or a certain methodology, but considers a composition of methods including a specified approach according to the question and problem. It is constituent that here also the conceptual contexts of cultures, religions and schools of thought which are analyzed and compared should be considered.

The selection and assembly of methods for a systematically planned approach should be implemented in such a way that useful aspects of other methods are also integrated into the total structure. Certainly, speaking from our own experience, we know that conflicts may arise when two parties in search for the solution for a problem propose different methods and approaches. It is important that the correctness of the own method is not comparable to the incorrectness of other methods, which is often the case.

For interpersonal communication, inter-textual analyses or the elaboration of intercultural studies the range of coherent methods allows a construction of connected structures in order to collect,

⁸ Cf. Jaeger, Friedrich, Burkhard Liebsch, Jörn Rüsen und Jürgen Straub: *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften* (in drei Bänden), Stuttgart 2004.

systematize and interpret the information as such. The following illustration shows this composition of methods:



The listed methods of interculturality are extensible and can be prolonged onto other sub-disciplines. They can be summarized as follows:

An **analytical approach** means theoretically dividing the object of research into its components in order to understand it.

A **historical approach** means putting the research object into a historical context and analyzing it from this perspective.

A **phenomological approach** means describing different forms of self-awareness and awareness of the other in order to gain dialogical aspects.

A **comparatistic approach** means relating different models to each other, affirming similarities and differences, without scaling them down on one another or playing them off against each other.

A **semantic approach** means clearing the terminology of individual linguistic expressions and setting them in a reciprocal context.

An **encyclical approach** means thoroughly analyzing the object of research and understandably conceiving it.

An **empirical approach** means assuming experiences, by avoiding appraisals and systematically collecting and evaluating these experiences.

An **approach based on philosophy of science** means to trace questions of theory constructions, definition of terms and explication of assumptions.

A **normative approach** means analyzing the object of research against the background of ideals it lies upon.

An **epistemic approach** means lifting the object of research onto an epistemic platform and to outlining logical structures.

A **rationalistic approach** means using the abilities of reason and considering what various rationales it brings up in the comparison and understanding of cultures.

A **dialectic approach** means to reveal the internal oppositions in an object of research and to outline the dynamic it bears in the total range.

I call the method of interculturality »compensatory«, because the interaction of these components offer the basis for a cooperative learning culture, which a) identifies structural and correlative contexts, b) facilitates a manifold analysis of these contexts and c) enables the examination of the circumstance on the way to a polyphone dialogue.

The method of interculturality has a responsive character and is, based on its quality, applicable for adopting a foundation of different »factors of culture-specific and individually shaped life and learning experiences«⁹ of ones own and the other, as well as communicatively dressing the knowledge upon diverse school of thoughts and learning traditions.

⁹ Cf. Neuner, Gerhard und Hans Hunfeld: *Methoden des fremdsprachlichen Deutschunterrichts*. Eine Einführung, Berlin 1993, S. 124.

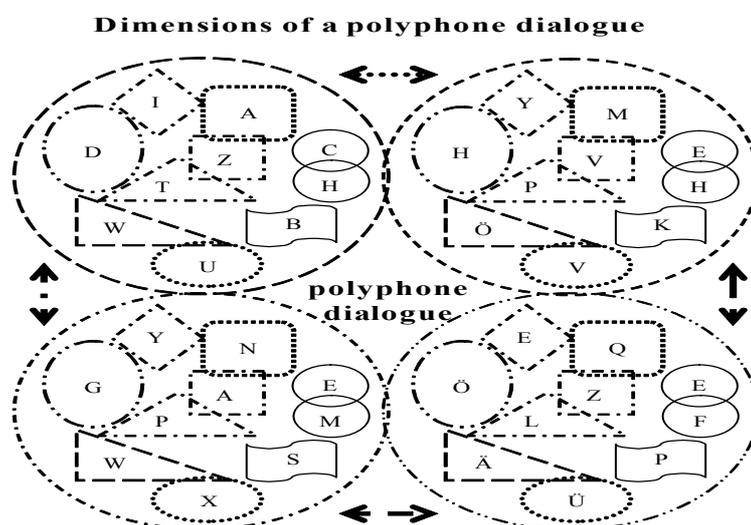
Tasks of interculturality

The main task of interculturality is, as mentioned, to bring about a critical-argumentative dialogue between and in between manifold figures of schools of science, society and politics. Its aim is to cause a paradigm change and an expanded consciousness for the awareness and meeting of individuals.

Interculturality puts different discourses and approaches into a context and argues upon its divergences and convergences in each context. With this, a polyphone dialogue is aimed at, in which the will to understand and to be understood by the own and the other are reciprocal. Interculturality takes place through a number of dialogues that can be differentiated into:

1. cultural, which do not prefer a tradition, but intend a reciprocal enrichment through communication and interaction,
2. philosophical, which cultivate the viewpoint that the ›truth‹ is searched by everyone and is no one's exclusive possession,
3. philosophical-historical, which assumes the plurality of histories and rejects any privilege or absolutization of a certain history,
4. religious, which shows that enlightenment is possible regardless of the respective image of God or answer to theodicy,
5. religious-scientific, which comprehend that religions and cultures are grounded in conjoint ›environments‹ they combine with each other,
6. historical, which work on the consequences of forceful conflicts and which are geared to outline overlaps and differences in the history and presence of cultures,
7. economical, with the goal to outline main problems like globalization and business ethics, especially the resolution of distribution conflicts in the context of the global economy,
8. pedagogical, with the goal to support a mind of reciprocal tolerance from Kindergarten to adult education,
9. psychological, which analyze the main features of mental behavior of humans and their different forms of appearances on the level of equality,
10. sociological, which looks into the sociology of cultures and determines the impact of *intra-* and *intercultural* behavior on social structures.

The following chart illustrates the complexity and multi-dimensionality of a polyphone dialogue, which assumes a number of methods and structural conditions:



The process of such dialogues is at many times not continuous, as the different gratings in the illustrations show, since it is often conducted by a number of systematic-structural and contextual reference fields, problems and hindrances that influence or even define the procedure and its target course.

Orientation range of interculturality

In order to professionalize this new discipline discrimination between three linked orientation frames must take place: the historical, the systematic and the comparative interculturality.

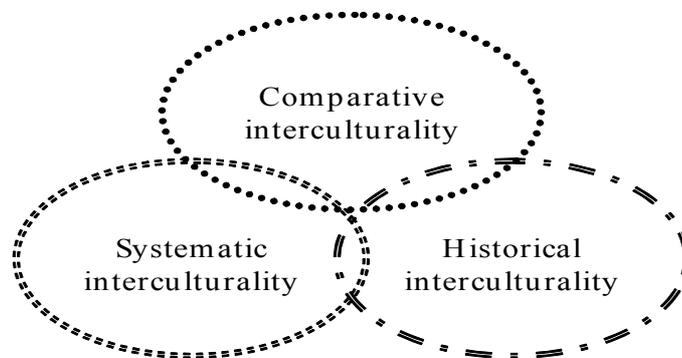
a) **Historical interculturality** analyzes in the context of socio-, humanistic- and cultural-scientific historiography intercultural encounters and examines its continuity and discontinuity. It is not only confined to matters of East-West divergences or East-West convergences but also comprises the entire horizon or human forms of encounter in its depth and width. One example is answering the question on how these historical encounters took place and what we can learn, seen from our present situation. How e.g. is the governance of the Persian King Cyrus (559-529 B.C.) or of the Castilian King Alfonso X. (1221-1284) to be reckoned? Cyrus always intended, with the help of his ethic commission, to account the different nations in the Persian multi-ethnic state in consideration of their rituals and cultural features for a peaceful political and social co-existence. Alfonso X. gave the translation school of Toledo ground-breaking impetus, and under his governance Christians, Muslims and Jews together translated ancient scriptures from Greek, Sanskrit, Arabic and Hebrew. Such important examples enable us to draw adequate conclusions for today's discourses.

b) **Systematic interculturality** comprises ›correlative terms‹, which involve the areas of the own and the other, competence, tolerance, semantic, hermeneutic and comparative literature as well as ethic and its terminologies, thus a conceptual construct. Included are terms like logic, epistemology and truth. The conceptual contexts and understanding of cultures may also be kept in mind. All mentioned terms provide a construction of a successful intercultural communication, which itself is a partial discipline of interculturality. Further areas are included alongside the correlative terms. Insofar it deals with the selection of those terms most valuable for the discourse.

c) **Comparative interculturality** not merely examines divergences and convergences of socio-, humanistic- and cultural-scientific historiographies, but also correlates theories and thoughts which deal with fields of interculturality or areas that are relevant for the research of interculturality.

In doing so, it is necessary to consider relations, typical changes and characteristic peculiarities including their methods of resolution.

The following illustration shows the intrinsic entanglement of the three areas of orientation:



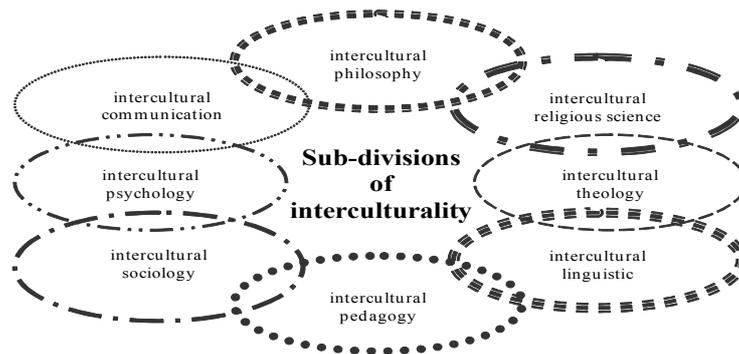
Sub-divisions of interculturality

Since the end of the 1990s of the 20th century a cultural-scientific change has been taking place, that immediately effects on teachings and research as well as the society, science and politics in the world context. We can cumulatively witness this in between and between the traditional and intercultural ethnology¹⁰, traditional and intercultural theology¹¹ or traditional and intercultural philosophy.¹² All other disciplines are running into this direction. This includes divisions such as intercultural sociology, intercultural pedagogy, intercultural religious science, intercultural law and political science, intercultural German language and literature studies, intercultural linguistic or intercultural communication along with its sub-disciplines. The borderlines between the subjects and similar sub-disciplines, which are always fluent, may be visualized as follows:

¹⁰ Cf. Antweiler, Christoph: *Grundpositionen interkultureller Ethnologie*, Nordhausen 2007.

¹¹ Cf. Hock, Klaus: *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, Darmstadt 2011.

¹² Cf. Yousefi, Hamid Reza: *Interkulturalität und Geschichte. Perspektiven für eine globale Philosophie*, Reinbek 2010.



These branches differentiate from traditional forms by their handling with the other in the context of history and presence. An outstanding feature of these branches is their significant interdisciplinarity.

Outlook

The intention of my reasoning of interculturality as an academic discipline was to show quite plainly that its development should not be understood statically but rather dynamically. It is an evolutionary progress. According to this development we increasingly find officially licensed training centers that support interculturality and intercultural learning.

The participants of the trainings are in general not only enthusiastic laymen, but first and foremost students of universities, teaching personnel from schools as well as leading personnel from the areas of economy, administration and social facilities. They are educated as intercultural coaches or mediators. The end of a critical continuation of the discipline of interculturality is not foreseeable, which would run contrary to its process-related character.

The study of interculturality certainly empowers to adequately acknowledge our location in the modern world in a scientific manner and to accordingly mediate dialogically between life design and cultural worlds.

Yet, the presented article questions the location of this discipline in a current and future education system. Whichever way it leads along through in future, there is no doubt that: Its science and world-embracing relevance will again and again be demonstrated by the proficiencies of researchers, teachers and students.

(Short biography of the editor):

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