

Article

Developing Religious Language Through Liturgical Learning: A Heuristic Model for Primary Religious Education

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Abstract

Religious language is increasingly recognized as a central dimension of religious education, yet the processes through which it develops remain insufficiently specified, particularly in relation to liturgical participation. While research on religious literacy and interpretive learning has primarily focused on understanding and communicating religious meaning, studies of ritual and liturgical learning have emphasized participation and embodiment without systematically explaining their contribution to religious language development. This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing liturgical learning as a formative environment for the emergence of religious language. Drawing on research in religious education, ritual theory, liturgical studies, and practice-based theories of formation, the article develops a heuristic model that explains religious language development as a dynamic and recursive process. The model comprises five interrelated dimensions: participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection. Rather than describing a linear sequence of stages, these dimensions illuminate how learners encounter, appropriate, articulate, and critically engage with religious forms of meaning within liturgical practices. Methodologically, the study employs theoretical and conceptual analysis to synthesize existing scholarship and construct an integrative framework. The article concludes that religious language is not merely acquired through instruction or interpretation but emerges through participation in symbolic and communicative practices. The proposed model provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research and offers orientation for the design of primary religious education.

Keywords: religious language development; liturgical learning; religious education; ritual participation; religious literacy; primary religious education; performative learning; practice theory; heuristic model



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1. Introduction

Religious language is one of the most contested and educationally significant issues in contemporary religious education. In many Western European contexts, including Austria and Germany, increasing religious diversification and ongoing secularization have reduced children's participation in institutional and everyday religious practices. As a result, many children no longer acquire religious language through regular engagement with religious communities, worship, or family-based religious practices. At the same time, the ability to understand, interpret, and use religious language remains a central aim of religious education (Jackson 2004, chap. 1; Schweitzer 2024, pp. 100–6).

At the same time, religious education continues to rely on learners' engagement with prayers, symbols, narratives, and ritual forms of expression that presuppose at least a basic competence in understanding and using religious language. However, this competence can no longer be assumed to have been acquired through family, congregational, or community-based religious socialization prior to formal religious education. For many children, educational settings have become one of the primary contexts in which religious language is encountered, practiced, and interpreted (Dressler 2020, pp. 13–28; Englert 2013, chap. 2).

This creates a tension between curricular expectations and the actual conditions of religious socialization. While curricula often presuppose a gradual development of religious communicative competence, the processes through which children appropriate, transform, and reflect upon religious language in educational contexts remain under-specified in current research (Altmeyer 2021, pp. 14–16).

Existing research in religious education has generated important insights into religious literacy, interpretive learning, and processes of religious meaning-making (Jackson 2019, pp. 79–85). Religious language is increasingly understood not merely as a medium for communicating religious content but as a constitutive element of religious learning itself (Altmeyer 2021; Dressler 2020; Schweitzer 2024). At the same time, studies of ritual and liturgical practice have highlighted the formative significance of participation, embodiment, symbolic action, and communal worship (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, pp. 21–26). While both strands of scholarship emphasize important dimensions of religious formation, their relationship has remained insufficiently explored with regard to the development of religious language. Existing approaches to religious language tend to focus primarily on interpretation, communication, and literacy, whereas studies of liturgy and ritual rarely address how participation in such practices contributes to the appropriation and use of religious language. Although recent contributions have begun to connect liturgical learning and religious education (e.g., Seper 2023), a systematic account of how religious language develops through engagement in liturgical practices is still lacking.

This article addresses this gap by proposing that liturgical learning can be conceptualized as a formative space for religious language development. It builds on the assumption that religious language is not primarily acquired through the transmission of concepts or vocabulary but emerges through participation in socially and symbolically structured practices. Here, religious language refers not only to verbal expressions of faith but also to the symbolic, ritual, and performative dimensions through which religious meaning is communicated and mediated. Drawing on practice-based theories of formation, liturgical participation can be understood as a constitutive condition for the emergence of religious language rather than merely its application (J. K. A. Smith 2009). From this perspective, liturgical settings such as prayer, ritual action, and symbolic performance are not merely illustrative elements of religious education but constitute epistemic environments in which religious meaning is enacted, experienced, and gradually appropriated. Within these environments, learners are not passive recipients of religious language but active participants in its communicative and performative constitution. Liturgical practices therefore establish a particularly promising context because they integrate symbolic action, bodily participation, communal communication, and religious language within one coherent practice.

The main contribution of this article is the development of a heuristic model that conceptualizes religious language development as a dynamic process emerging through engagement with liturgical learning. The model proposes five interrelated dimensions—participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection—that together describe how religious language is gradually formed, appropriated, and transformed in educational contexts.

Rather than proposing a linear developmental sequence, the model serves as an analytical framework that shows how religious language develops through recursive engagement in practice. It integrates insights from religious education, ritual and liturgical studies, and practice-based theories of formation into a coherent conceptual perspective. While the model is not restricted to primary education, primary school learners provide a particularly relevant context because of the significance of symbolic learning, ritual participation, and language development during childhood.

The article proceeds as follows: First, it outlines key approaches to religious language development in religious education. Second, it conceptualizes liturgical learning as a distinctive form of symbolic and communicative practice. Third, it identifies the theoretical gap that emerges between current accounts of religious language and liturgical participation. Fourth, it develops a heuristic model of religious language development through liturgical learning. Finally, it considers implications for religious education and future empirical research.

2. Religious Language Development in Religious Education

2.1. Religious Language as a Constitutive Dimension of Religious Education

Religious language is widely regarded as a constitutive dimension of religious education, as it provides both a medium for articulating religious meaning and a framework for engaging with religious traditions. Rather than functioning merely as a vehicle for communicating pre-given content, religious language shapes how religious phenomena are perceived, interpreted, and expressed. In this sense, it is not external to religious learning but constitutive of it (Altmeyer 2021, pp. 17–20).

Within religious education research, this assumption is developed across several intersecting strands. First, competence- and *Bildung*-oriented approaches emphasize that religious learning involves more than the acquisition of factual knowledge; it includes the development of expressive and interpretive capacities that enable participation in religious meaning-making processes (Dressler 2020, chap. 2; Englert 2013, chap. 4; Schweitzer 2024, pp. 38–53). Second, approaches focusing on religious communication and language-sensitive teaching underline the importance of linguistic mediation in processes of religious learning (Altmeyer et al. 2021; Schulte 2021). Third, interpretive approaches highlight the role of representation, interpretation, and reflexivity in engaging with religious traditions (Jackson 2004, 2019).

Across these strands, there is broad agreement that religious language plays a central role in religious education. However, the mechanisms through which religious language develops in educational contexts remain comparatively under-specified. In particular, the question of how learners acquire and transform religious forms of expression over time is rarely addressed in a systematic way.

2.2. Religious Language Between Sprachbildung and Religious Literacy

In German-language religious education discourse, the relationship between language and religious learning has been addressed particularly in approaches to language-sensitive religious education (*sprachsensibler Religionsunterricht*), where religious language competence is discussed as one dimension within broader educational language development (Altmeyer et al. 2021). In this context, religious language is understood both as a medium of instruction and as an object of educational reflection.

In the English-language discourse, no fully equivalent concept exists. The notion of religious language development, as used in this article, overlaps partially with the concept of religious literacy, although the latter is typically framed in broader cultural and interpretive terms (Jackson 2004, chap. 5). While religious literacy approaches have significantly advanced the understanding of how learners interpret religious symbols,

narratives, and practices in plural contexts, they tend to focus primarily on interpretive competence rather than on the development of religious language as such.

Against this background, religious language development is understood here as the gradually emerging ability of learners to perceive, interpret, use, and reflect upon religious forms of expression, including symbols, narratives, rituals, and prayers. This definition synthesizes insights from research on religious competence, interpretive learning, and practice-based theories of formation.

2.3. Limits of Dominant Frameworks: Religious Literacy, Meaning-Making, and Interpretation

Questions of language have gained increasing attention within contemporary religious education research. This renewed interest is reflected, for example, in the thematic issue *Religious Education as Linguistic Education* of Theo-Web (Schwarz and Meyer 2026). The contributions gathered in this issue address questions of religious language, language-sensitive religious education, religious communication, and the role of language in religious learning. Collectively, they demonstrate that language has become a central concern of contemporary religious education scholarship. At the same time, the issue also illustrates that the specific relationship between liturgical learning and religious language development has not yet been conceptualized systematically. It is precisely this gap that the present article seeks to address. Within this broader discussion, influential approaches have framed religious learning in terms of religious literacy, meaning-making, and interpretation. These approaches have substantially advanced the understanding of how learners engage with religious traditions in pluralistic contexts (Kropač 2019, pp. 33–35). Interpretive models of religious education, in particular those developed by Jackson (2004, chap. 6), emphasize the importance of representation, interpretation, and reflexivity in processes of religious learning.

These approaches primarily conceptualize religious language as a medium through which religious meanings are interpreted, communicated, and reflected upon (e.g., Dressler 2020; Englert 2013; Schweitzer 2024). Their primary concern lies in learners' interpretive engagement with religious meanings rather than in explaining how capacities for religious language emerge through participation in socially and materially structured practices.

Empirical research on children's engagement with religious and liturgical practices supports the assumption that learning in such contexts is strongly sensory, affective, and socially embedded and that learners actively contribute to the constitution of liturgical-ritual spaces through multimodal forms of engagement (Van Leersum-Bekebrede et al. 2021). Similarly, research on liturgical education in school contexts highlights the formative potential of ritual participation (Seper 2023). However, these studies do not yet provide systematic models of how such participation relates to the development of religious language competence.

While religious literacy approaches have significantly advanced our understanding of how learners interpret religious symbols, narratives, and practices, they tend to conceptualize participation primarily as a context for interpretation. The perspective developed in this article extends these approaches by proposing that participation in liturgical practices is not merely the application of religious language but a constitutive condition for its formation. Religious language is therefore understood as emerging through engagement in ritualized and communicative practices rather than as a competence acquired prior to participation.

Discussion of the educational significance of liturgy and ritual is not new. Christian educators and liturgical theologians such as John Westerhoff, Maria Harris, Philip Pfatteicher, and Debra Dean Murphy have long emphasized the formative role of ritual participation for faith development, Christian formation, and religious education. These contributions demonstrate that liturgy is not merely an object of learning but can itself function as a

formative practice. However, while this scholarship highlights the educational significance of liturgical participation, it rarely addresses the specific question of how religious language develops through engagement in liturgical practices. The present study builds on these broader discussions while focusing more explicitly on religious language formation.

Against this background, a conceptual gap becomes apparent. While interpretive approaches explain how learners understand religious language, and empirical studies demonstrate the formative potential of ritual participation, neither perspective sufficiently explains how religious language develops through engagement in liturgical practices. Addressing this gap requires a framework that integrates insights from religious education, practice theory, ritual theory, and liturgical studies.

2.4. Religious Language Development as a Dynamic and Practice-Related Process

Building on these strands of research, religious language development can be understood as an ongoing phenomenon. It refers not only to the acquisition of vocabulary or conceptual knowledge, but to the gradual development of the ability to engage with religious forms of meaning in perceptive, interpretive, expressive, and reflective ways. This processual understanding aligns with practice-based theories of learning and formation, which emphasize that meaning-making is shaped through participation in socially and culturally structured practices (J. K. A. Smith 2009). From this perspective, religious language is not primarily transmitted as a system of meanings but emerges through engagement with practices in which such language is enacted, heard, and used.

This perspective also resonates with research on child language acquisition. Contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize that language develops through participation in socially structured communicative practices rather than through explicit instruction alone. Repetition, shared attention, embodied interaction, and ritualized forms of communication have been identified as important conditions for language learning and linguistic development (Bruner 1983; Tomasello and Farrar 1986; Tomasello 2003). From this perspective, liturgical practices may be understood as distinctive communicative environments in which children repeatedly encounter, enact, and appropriate religious language within meaningful social interactions. Although liturgical practices are not primarily designed as contexts for language acquisition, they share important characteristics with communicative settings that support the development of language through participation. Accordingly, religious language development is conceptualized here as an open-ended and non-linear process in which learners encounter religious expressions in multimodal forms, relate them to personal and social experiences, and gradually develop the capacity to appropriate and transform them.

2.5. Working Definition and Theoretical Implication

For the purposes of this article, religious language development is understood as the ongoing process through which learners progressively develop the ability to perceive, interpret, express, and reflect upon religious forms of meaning and communication within situated educational contexts.

This definition integrates insights from competence-oriented religious education (Englert 2013, chap. 7; Kropač 2019, chap. 6.3), interpretive approaches (Jackson 2019), and practice-based theories of formation (J. K. A. Smith 2009). It does not presuppose a linear developmental sequence but emphasizes the interrelation of multiple dimensions of engagement with religious language. At the same time, this conceptualization raises a further question: in which types of educational settings can such development be observed and supported? In particular, it suggests that religious practices themselves may function as formative environments for religious language development.

Associated with this is the concept of “Liturgische Bildung” (Sajak and Pröbsting 2020). Liturgical learning refers to educational processes in which pupils or students encounter, participate in, and reflect upon symbolic, ritual, and prayer-based forms of Christian worship. The following section therefore turns to the concept of liturgical learning as a practice-based form of formation and examines its potential contribution to religious language development.

3. Liturgical Learning as a Performative Language Space

Unlike many other forms of religious learning, liturgical practices integrate verbal language, symbolic action, bodily participation, communal interaction, and ritual structure within a single communicative event. This unique constellation makes liturgy a particularly fruitful environment for exploring religious language development as a practice-based process.

3.1. Liturgy as Symbolic-Performative Practice

As a specific form of ritual practice, liturgy can therefore not be adequately understood solely as a system of theological meanings. Rather, it constitutes a symbolic-performative practice in which religious meaning is communicated, enacted, and experienced through ritual action. As Gerhards and Kranemann argue, liturgical rituals are characterized by expressive forms of action (*expressive Handlungsgeschehen*) that are interpreted and articulated through language but cannot be reduced to verbal communication alone (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, p. 22). As symbolic actions, they transcend purely functional forms of communication and point beyond immediately observable reality toward religious dimensions of meaning (Adam and Haunerland 2014, pp. 107–14).

Two characteristics of liturgical practice are particularly relevant for the present study: performance and embodiment. First, liturgy contains performative speech acts whose significance lies not merely in what they describe but in what they accomplish through their enactment. Prayers, blessings, acclamations, and ritual responses do not simply communicate religious meaning; they participate in its realization. Through such actions, liturgy enables experiences that are difficult to access through propositional instruction alone (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, chap. 5.3).

Second, liturgy is fundamentally embodied. Communication takes place not only through words but also through gestures, bodily postures, movements, spatial arrangements, and sensory experiences. Meaning is therefore mediated through the body as well as through language. Participation in liturgical practices involves learners in multi-modal forms of communication that engage cognitive, affective, and bodily dimensions simultaneously (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, pp. 23–24, 180–1).

Liturgical practices thus constitute structured symbolic environments in which religious meaning is enacted rather than merely transmitted.

3.2. Practice, Formation, and Participation

Practice-based theories in religious education and social theory emphasize that human learning is fundamentally shaped through participation in practices rather than primarily through the acquisition of abstract knowledge. Practices are not merely contexts in which learning takes place; they are formative environments that structure perception, orientation, and action. From this perspective, learning is understood as a process of becoming involved in socially and culturally structured forms of life (J. K. A. Smith 2009, pp. 17–27).

A central contribution to this perspective is offered by theories of practice that highlight the formative character of participation. J. K. A. Smith (2009, pp. 39–55) argues that practices are not neutral or purely functional, but shape human beings at the level of desire, imagination, and lived orientation. Participation in practices precedes reflective

understanding and contributes to the formation of dispositions that guide perception and interpretation. In this sense, practices are not simply things that people do; they are environments that shape what people perceive as meaningful and worth pursuing (J. K. A. Smith 2009, pp. 75–88).

A similar emphasis can be found in the educational work of D. I. Smith (2018), who highlights the formative character of educational practices and the ways in which participation in structured learning environments contributes to the development of interpretive habits and orientations. From this perspective, learning is not reducible to explicit instruction or conceptual acquisition but involves bodily engagement in patterned forms of activity that shape how learners understand and inhabit the world.

Although these approaches emerge from different disciplinary contexts, they converge in their understanding of practices as corporeal and socially embedded forms of activity. Practices are sustained through repetition, communal participation, and shared metaphorical frameworks. In this sense, they are both stabilising and formative: they provide continuity while simultaneously shaping the participants who engage in them. Bourdieu's concept of habitus further strengthens this account by describing how durable dispositions are generated through the repeated enactment of socially structured practices. These dispositions operate at a pre-reflective level and orient perception, action, and judgement without requiring explicit cognitive awareness (Bourdieu 2010).

Ritual and religious studies further reinforce this perspective by emphasizing that practices are not only cognitive or behavioural structures but also bodily and affective formations. Rituals, in particular, are characterized by repetitive, symbolically structured actions that engage participants at multiple levels, including bodily movement, sensory perception, and emotional orientation. These dimensions indicate that participation in practices involves more than intellectual engagement; it engages the whole person within a structured environment of meaning (Bell 1992, chap. 4; Grimes 2013, pp. 242–8).

For religious education, this has significant implications. If learning is fundamentally practice-based, then religious education cannot be reduced to the transmission of doctrinal knowledge or the interpretation of religious content. Instead, it must also account for the formative effects of participation in religiously structured practices. Learners do not only learn about religion; they are also shaped through engagement with religious forms of practice (D. I. Smith 2018; J. K. A. Smith 2009, pp. 75–79).

However, while practice-based theories provide a powerful account of formation, they remain relatively open with regard to the specific ways in which different dimensions of learning emerge within practices. In particular, they do not explicitly address how linguistic dimensions are formed within participatory environments. This raises the question of how learners learn to express, interpret, and articulate religious meaning within practice-based settings. Against this background, the following section turns to liturgical practices as a specific form of communicative practice in which religious language is both encountered and enacted. It examines how learners develop religious language when they participate in and communicate through liturgical practices.

3.3. Liturgical Learning as Communicative and Performative Practice

Building on practice-based accounts of formation, liturgical contexts can be understood as structured environments in which meaning is not primarily transmitted but enacted through bodily and communicative practices. In this sense, liturgy is not merely a setting in which religious content is expressed, but a practice in which meaning emerges through performance, repetition, and participation (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, pp. 61–65).

Ritual studies have long emphasized that rituals are not primarily signifying representations of pre-given meanings, but lived and enacted practices through which meaning

is generated and stabilized. Bell (1992) has shown that ritualization involves the strategic structuring of action, in which meaning is produced through patterned bodily engagement rather than conceptual articulation alone. From this perspective, liturgical practices are not secondary expressions of belief, but can be seen as primary sites of meaning-making.

Building on this insight, liturgy can be described as a symbolic-performative practice in which communication is not reducible to verbal exchange, but unfolds through a complex interplay of speech, gesture, rhythm, space, and embodiment, meaning is enacted rather than merely communicated (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, p. 22).

Michael Meyer-Blanck, for example, understands liturgy as a form of religious communication in which meaning is mediated through symbolic and ritual forms rather than through verbal instruction alone. From this perspective, liturgical language is embedded within broader linguistic processes that involve meaning-laden actions, ritual structures, and communal participation. Building on insights from ritual theory, these interactional processes can be understood as encompassing verbal as well as bodily dimensions of meaning-making (Meyer-Blanck 2020, pp. 25–40).

Building on Meyer-Blanck's understanding of liturgy as religious communication and Bell's conception of ritual as a structured form of practice, liturgy can be understood as a communicative space in which religious language is encountered within corporeal and metaphorical forms of action. Speech acts such as prayer, blessing, confession, and proclamation derive their meaning not merely from linguistic content but from their embeddedness in ritual structures and communal performance (Bell 1992; Meyer-Blanck 2020).

A similar emphasis can be found in the liturgical educational perspective, which highlights the pedagogical potential of participation in liturgical practices. Seper (2023) argues that school-based forms of liturgical learning, such as classroom celebrations, school worship, and educationally guided participation in liturgical practices, can function as spaces of experiential learning in which learners encounter religious language not as abstract content, but as enacted and situated practice. In this sense, participation in liturgy enables forms of learning that are affective, relational, and interpretive at the same time.

Seper's work points to the educational relevance of liturgical participation, but it also raises a theoretical question: how exactly does participation in ritual practices contribute to the development of religious language competence? While liturgical settings provide rich environments of symbolic and expressive engagement, the mechanisms through which linguistic and expressive capacities are formed remain under-theorized.

The focus on educational settings reflects the concern of the present study, which is situated within religious education rather than liturgical theology. While participation in congregational worship and ecclesial liturgy remains highly relevant for the development of religious language, many children in contemporary Western European contexts encounter structured forms of religious language primarily in educational settings. School-based religious education therefore provides a particularly important context for examining how religious language develops through engagement with ritual and liturgical practices. At the same time, the framework proposed here is not restricted to educational settings and may also inform future research on children's participation in worship and communal liturgical life.

From a ritual-theoretical perspective, this gap becomes particularly evident. While Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization explains how meaning is structured through practice, it does not explicitly address how linguistic expression develops within these structures. Ritual is understood as a mode of practice, but not yet as a site of language formation.

Liturgical practices can therefore be understood as language-based environments in which meaning is enacted through a mutual interplay of verbal and non-verbal forms. However, the relationship between participation in such practices and the development

of religious language remains conceptually underexplored. In particular, it is not yet sufficiently clarified how children's engagement in liturgical practices contributes to the emergence and differentiation of expressive and interpretive linguistic capacities.

Against this background, liturgical learning can be conceptualized as a process in which participation, perception, and expression are interwoven. It involves not only exposure to religious language, but also gradual participation in its action-oriented use within structured ritual contexts. However, a systematic model that explains how such participation translates into religious language development is still lacking.

This leads to the central question: how can religious language development be conceptualized as emerging through participation in liturgical practices that are simultaneously symbolic, performative, and communicative in nature? While liturgical practices can be conceptualized as dialogical environments in which religious language is encountered, interpreted, and embodied, this perspective raises a further didactic question: whether and how participation alone can account for the development of religious language competence.

3.4. Participation and Reflection: A Didactic Perspective

From a didactic perspective, it is therefore necessary to qualify the assumption that participation in liturgical practices is sufficient for learning processes. Performative approaches to religious education (Leonhard and Klie 2012; Mendl 2016b), as well as liturgical pedagogical perspectives (Sajak and Pröbsting 2020; Seper 2023), emphasize that educationally relevant learning emerges only when participation is systematically related to reflection and articulation. Participation alone does not automatically generate religious language competence. Rather, religious language development presupposes processes in which experiential participation is accompanied by interpretive and expressive activities that render practice communicable and reflectively accessible (Mendl 2016a).

This qualification is crucial, as it prevents a reduction of religious education to mere ritual immersion and instead foregrounds the interplay of practice, reflection, and language formation. At the same time, while both practice-theoretical and didactic approaches acknowledge the importance of participation and reflection, they rarely specify how these dimensions interact in the formation of religious language competence within liturgical contexts. This points to the conceptual gap between accounts of religious formation and accounts of linguistic development.

Taken together, the preceding discussion reveals a double blind spot in current scholarship. Language-oriented approaches explain how religious language is interpreted, appropriated, and reflected upon, but largely neglect the formative role of liturgical participation. Conversely, research on liturgical learning demonstrates the educational significance of ritual participation without explaining how such participation contributes to the development of religious language. Existing theories therefore illuminate complementary aspects of the problem without providing an integrated account. The following section addresses this conceptual gap by proposing a heuristic framework that conceptualizes religious language development as a cyclical process emerging through liturgical participation.

4. A Heuristic Model of Religious Language Development Through Liturgical Learning

Building on the preceding discussion, this article proposes a heuristic framework for understanding how religious language develops through liturgical learning. The model does not describe universal developmental stages or a fixed sequence of learning. Instead, it offers an analytical perspective on how participation in liturgical practices contributes to the formation of religious language.

The framework synthesizes four complementary theoretical traditions. Practice theory highlights the formative significance of participation in shaping dispositions and ways of acting (Bourdieu 2010; J. K. A. Smith 2009). Ritual theory explains how ritualization structures perception and embodied engagement (Bell 1992; Grimes 2013). Liturgical studies emphasize the communicative and signifying character of liturgical action (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019; Meyer-Blanck 2020). Religious education contributes concepts of interpretation, appropriation, expression, and reflection as central dimensions of religious learning (Altmeyer 2011; Englert 2013; Schweitzer 2024). Together, these perspectives suggest five analytically distinguishable yet dynamically interconnected dimensions of religious language development.

The model assumes that religious language competence is not primarily acquired through the transmission of religious knowledge but emerges through participation in religious communicative and ritual practices (Bourdieu 2010; J. K. A. Smith 2009). Liturgical learning is therefore understood not merely as an object of religious education, but as a distinctive mode of religious language formation. Within liturgical practices, learners encounter, interpret, appropriate, and articulate religious forms of expression in participatory, symbolic, and dialogical ways (Seper 2023).

Religious language development is conceptualized as an iterative and multidimensional process. The five dimensions are analytically distinct but mutually dependent, and learners may move between them in different ways. Participation in prayer, ritual action, representational performance, and spoken or sung forms of worship provides opportunities for religious language to be encountered, appropriated, expressed, and critically reflected upon.

Liturgical learning constitutes a particularly fruitful context because liturgical practices uniquely combine verbal language, symbolic action, bodily participation, communal interaction, ritual structure, and theological meaning within a single communicative event. Unlike many other educational contexts, liturgy integrates speaking, acting, perceiving, interpreting, and reflecting in one coherent practice. This integrated character provides the theoretical rationale for conceptualizing liturgical learning as a distinctive environment for religious language development.

The five dimensions should not be understood as arbitrarily selected categories. Rather, they emerge from recurring concerns shared across practice theory, ritual theory, liturgical studies, and religious education. Participation describes entry into practice; perception the emergence of symbolic awareness; interpretation the construction of meaning; expression the appropriation of language for one's own communication; and reflection the critical transformation of experience.

The five dimensions do not represent developmental stages but address distinct analytical questions concerning the emergence of religious language within liturgical practice. They focus on how learners enter religious practices, become attentive to symbolic forms, attribute meaning to them, appropriate them linguistically, and critically reflect upon them. Practice theory emphasizes participation as the entry point into formative practices. Ritual theory highlights perceptual and embodied attunement to symbolic forms. Religious education contributes the dimensions of interpretation and expression as central processes of meaning-making and religious communication, while educational and performative approaches underline the importance of reflection as a condition for critical appropriation and transformation. Together, these dimensions contribute to broader processes of encountering, appropriating, articulating, reflecting upon, and transforming religious meaning. These processes are summarized in the model as religious language development and represent the overarching educational horizon toward which the five dimensions contribute.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of religious language development through liturgical learning. It shows how insights from practice theory, ritual theory, liturgical studies, and religious education inform liturgical learning as a formative environment in which participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection interact recursively and contribute to the ongoing development of religious language.

The following sections discuss each dimension separately for analytical purposes. While presented individually, the dimensions should be understood as mutually interrelated aspects of a recursive process rather than as sequential stages of development.

To illustrate the proposed framework, consider an Advent celebration at school. At the beginning of the celebration, a group of primary school children gather around an Advent wreath, sing a familiar Advent song, and light the first candle together. The children join in the liturgical responses, observe the gestures of the celebration, and experience the atmosphere created by silence, music, candlelight, and communal prayer.

Through this active involvement, the children first encounter religious language through participation. They hear words and phrases such as *hope*, *waiting*, or *light* within a concrete liturgical context and become involved in the communal practice in which these expressions are used.

Participation is accompanied by perception. The children notice the increasing brightness of the candle, the change in atmosphere, the spoken prayers, and the symbolic actions. These sensory and emotional experiences draw attention to dimensions of meaning that cannot be reduced to verbal explanation alone.

Based on these experiences, processes of interpretation emerge. Guided by brief liturgical impulses and classroom discussion, the children begin to connect the light of the candle with ideas of hope, expectation, comfort, or the presence of God. They relate the symbolic action to their own experiences and gradually appropriate the meanings expressed within the tradition.

The children then move toward expression. They formulate their own prayers, contribute intercessions, or describe in their own words what the candle and the Advent season mean to them. In doing so, they begin to use religious language actively rather than merely receiving it passively. Words, images, and symbolic expressions that were initially encountered in the liturgical practice become part of their own communicative repertoire.

Finally, the celebration is followed by reflection. In a subsequent conversation, the children discuss what they experienced, which words or symbols were meaningful to them, and how their understanding may have changed. Reflection not only consolidates previous learning but also influences future participation by enabling children to engage more consciously and confidently in subsequent liturgical practices.

This example illustrates how religious language development emerges through the dynamic interaction of participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection. Rather than representing a linear sequence, these dimensions mutually influence one another and recur throughout repeated engagement in liturgical practice. Through ongoing participation in communal worship, children gradually develop the capacity to understand, use, and critically engage with religious language.

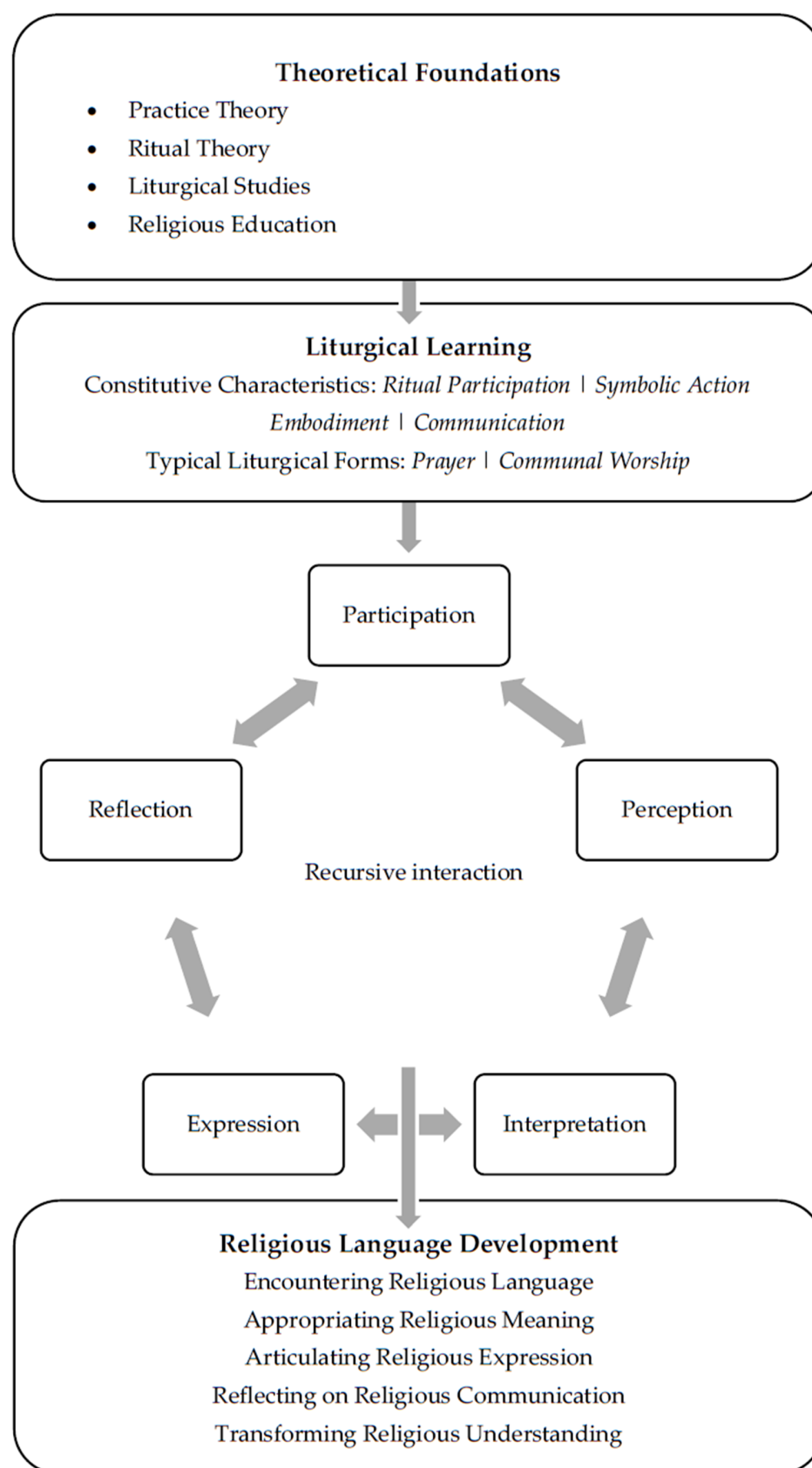


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of religious language development through liturgical learning. The figure visualizes the relationship between the model's theoretical foundations, liturgical learning as a formative environment, the five recursive dimensions of the framework, and processes of religious language development.

4.1. Participation and Encounter

The first dimension describes the embodied involvement of learners in liturgical practices. It refers to the ways in which children encounter and participate in forms of religious communication through speaking prayers, performing gestures, responding to ritual cues, singing, and engaging in collective forms of ritualized behavior.

Building on practice-based theories of formation, participation is not understood as the application of previously acquired religious knowledge, but as a formative process in which religious language is encountered, enacted, and gradually appropriated through bodily and social engagement (Bourdieu 2010; J. K. A. Smith 2009). Human beings learn religious forms not primarily by first understanding them intellectually and subsequently applying them, but by entering into practices through which particular ways of perceiving, acting, and communicating are gradually formed.

Within this perspective, participation constitutes an initial encounter with religious language as a lived practice. Through the bodily performance of prayers, ritual responses, and symbolic actions, learners enter into forms of religious expression before they are able to articulate their meaning explicitly. Religious language is therefore not only something that is explained or interpreted; it is also something that is performed, experienced, and socially shared. In the illustrative example of the Advent celebration, the child may participate in lighting the Advent candle and joining in prayer without yet being able to explain why the light symbolizes hope or God's presence.

At this level, religious language is not yet fully available as reflective knowledge. Rather, it exists as an enacted form of communication embedded within ritual practice. This performative engagement provides the basis for subsequent processes of perception, interpretation, and linguistic articulation. Participation bridges learners' initial encounters with liturgical forms and their growing ability to recognize, interpret, and express religious meaning. Participation enables perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection while simultaneously being reshaped by them.

4.2. Perception and Attunement

Perception refers to learners' initial encounter with religious forms of expression in their bodily, symbolic, auditory, and spatial dimensions. In liturgical settings, religious language is not primarily encountered as abstract or propositional content, but as a multimodal field of signs, gestures, sounds, movements, and ritual structures. Although perception and participation are analytically distinguishable, participation is presented first because practice theories emphasize that learners enter religious practices before they become able to perceive their metaphorical structures in differentiated ways.

Children encounter prayers, ritual formulas, liturgical speech acts, symbols, and bodily practices before they are able to fully interpret their theological or conceptual meanings. The perceptual dimension is therefore foundational, as it introduces learners to religious language as a lived and structured communicative environment. Through repeated encounters with liturgical practices, learners gradually develop an awareness of meaningful distinctions between gesture and word, silence and speech, movement and stillness, space and action (Meyer et al. 1990).

However, perception should not be understood as passive reception. It already involves processes of attention, orientation, and affective engagement. From the perspective of ritual theory, perception constitutes a form of symbolic attunement through which learners become oriented within a meaningful world that exceeds immediate linguistic explanation. Ritual practices direct attention towards particular elements of experience and establish patterns of noticing that shape how participants encounter religious forms (Bell 1992; Grimes 2013).

This understanding is particularly important for conceptualizing religious language development. Religious language does not emerge only when learners are able to define religious concepts or explain theological meanings. Rather, it begins with the ability to recognize and attend to religiously meaningful forms. Liturgical environments function as signifying spaces in which words, gestures, objects, sounds, and bodily actions are experienced as interrelated forms of communication. For example, during the Advent celebration introduced above, the child gradually becomes attentive to the light, the accompanying gestures, and the distinctive atmosphere created by the communal ritual.

Following Bell's account of ritualization, ritual practices organize perception by establishing culturally meaningful patterns of attention and distinction. Grimes similarly emphasizes the sensory and lived dimensions of ritual, in which meaning emerges through participation in enacted forms. From a liturgical perspective, Gerhards and Kranemann highlight that liturgical actions function as symbolic forms whose meaning unfolds within the interaction of verbal and non-verbal elements (Gerhards and Kranemann 2019, p. 136).

Perception therefore represents the movement through which learners become attentive to religious forms before they are fully able to interpret or articulate them. It provides the basis for subsequent processes of meaning-making, expression, and reflection. At the same time, the relationship between these dimensions remains recursive: perception influences participation, participation deepens interpretation, interpretation enables new forms of expression, and reflection transforms future perception and engagement with liturgical practices. While perception concerns the recognition of symbolic forms, interpretation goes a step further by attributing meaning to them.

4.3. Interpretation and Meaning-Making

Interpretation refers to the processes through which learners begin to make sense of symbolic actions, ritual forms, and religious expressions by relating them to prior knowledge, personal experiences, and broader frameworks of meaning.

While participation and perception introduce learners to religious language as a participatory and meaning-laden reality, interpretation marks the process through which these experiences become meaningful. Learners begin to recognize patterns, establish relationships between symbols and meanings, and develop the ability to explain and articulate religious forms of expression. In this process, liturgical experiences are gradually connected with questions of belief, identity, tradition, and human existence.

Interpretation should not be understood as a purely intellectual activity that follows religious practice from the outside. Rather, it emerges from participation itself. Through repeated engagement with liturgical forms, learners develop interpretive frameworks that enable them to understand the significance of prayers, rituals, symbols, and religious speech acts. For example, within the Advent celebration, the lit candle may gradually be interpreted as a symbol of hope, comfort, or God's presence. Meaning is therefore not simply added to experience afterwards; it develops through the interaction between lived practice and reflective engagement.

From a liturgical perspective, this understanding corresponds with the view that liturgical communication is not merely the transmission of religious information but a signifying and performative process in which meaning is disclosed and interpreted through enacted forms. Meyer-Blanck (2020, pp. 25–40) emphasizes the communicative character of liturgy, in which verbal and non-verbal dimensions interact to create spaces of religious meaning. Similarly, Gerhards and Kranemann (2019, pp. 61–65) describe liturgical actions as symbolic forms whose significance invites and requires processes of interpretation and appropriation.

For religious education, this dimension is particularly significant because it describes the movement from sensory experience towards interpretative meaning-making. Religious language development does not consist merely in encountering religious expressions but in developing the capacity to interpret symbolic forms and relate them to personal experience, communal practice, and broader horizons of meaning (Englert 2013). Interpretation therefore transforms participation and perception into meaningful religious understanding and enables learners to appropriate religious language for their own processes of communication and reflection (Altmeyer 2021; Englert 2013).

4.4. Expression and Articulation

The fourth dimension of the model concerns the development of learners' capacity to actively use and articulate religious language. Expression refers to the process through which religious forms of communication become available for personal articulation. It includes the formulation of prayers, the use of symbolic and metaphorical language, the articulation of religious interpretations, and the creative recontextualization of inherited religious expressions.

Whereas participation, perception, and interpretation describe processes through which learners encounter and understand religious language, expression marks the point at which learners begin to appropriate religious forms and employ them within their own expressive practices. Religious language is no longer only something that is heard, observed, or interpreted; it becomes a resource through which learners can articulate experiences, questions, and understandings of meaning (Kropač 2021).

This process should not be understood as the simple reproduction of established liturgical formulas. Religious language competence involves the ability to engage creatively with existing forms of expression, to adapt them to new contexts, and to develop personal ways of articulating religious meaning. (Altmeyer 2021). For example, learners may initially repeat traditional prayers or ritual responses, but gradually begin to modify, expand, or reinterpret these forms in relation to their own experiences and perspectives. In the Advent celebration described above, a child who has repeatedly participated in the liturgical practice may describe the Advent candle as a sign of hope, write a short prayer inspired by the image of light, or explain in their own words how the symbol relates to God's presence.

From a religious educational perspective, expression becomes visible when learners begin to use religious language independently. Religious language becomes a lived and usable form of expression rather than merely an object of learning. The ability to formulate prayers, describe symbolic meanings, narrate religious experiences, or engage in reflective religious speech indicates that learners are increasingly able to participate in religious communication (Schulte 2021).

Also, expression remains connected to the previous dimensions of the model. The ability to articulate religious meaning depends on prior experiences of participation, perception, and interpretation, while newly developed forms of expression can reshape future participation and understanding. Religious language development therefore involves a continuous movement between receiving, interpreting, and producing religious forms of communication. In this sense, expression represents not the completion of religious language development but a moment of active appropriation.

4.5. Reflection and Transformation

Reflection refers to learners' growing ability to critically engage with religious language and religious experience. The fifth dimension of the model concerns reflection as the capacity to distance from liturgical practices and the language associated with them

in order to consider their meanings, functions, possibilities, and limitations. At this stage, religious language itself becomes an object of thought and discussion.

Reflection includes both metalinguistic and meta-religious awareness. Learners begin to recognize that religious language differs from everyday language in its metaphorical, performative, and ritual character. They become aware that prayers, blessings, biblical narratives, liturgical formulas, and symbolic expressions follow particular communicative conventions and fulfil specific religious functions. This growing awareness enables them to distinguish between different linguistic registers and to reflect upon the contexts in which particular forms of religious language are appropriate and meaningful (Kumlehn 2021).

From a religious educational perspective, reflection plays a crucial role because it mediates between participation and critical distance (Mendl 2016a). Educationally relevant language development does not result from participation alone, nor from detached cognitive analysis. Rather, it emerges through the systematic interaction of lived experience and reflective engagement (Klie and Leonhard 2008; Seper 2019). Reflection therefore enables learners to relate liturgical participation to their own experiences, prior knowledge, and questions of meaning while remaining open to multiple interpretations.

For example, following the Advent celebration, a child may reflect on the meaning of light as a symbol of hope, on the different ways participants may have interpreted the ritual, and on how the language of prayer differs from everyday forms of communication.

Reflection should not be understood as an activity external to liturgical learning but as an integral dimension of it. Performative approaches to religious education have repeatedly emphasized that participation acquires educational significance only when it is accompanied by opportunities for interpretation, dialogue, and critical appropriation. Reflection allows learners not only to explain religious forms of expression but also to evaluate, question, reinterpret, and integrate them into their own developing understanding of religion (Mendl 2016a).

Within the proposed model, reflection represents a cyclical rather than terminal dimension. Reflective engagement reshapes learners' future participation in liturgical practices, sharpens their perception of symbolic forms, enriches interpretive processes, and expands their expressive repertoire. Religious language development is therefore best understood as a continuous movement between participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection, each dimension informing and transforming the others.

Reflection thus completes the heuristic framework not by marking the end of religious language development, but by opening new possibilities for participation and communication. It is through this non-linear movement that learners gradually develop the capacity to engage with religious language in increasingly differentiated, critical, and personally meaningful ways.

4.6. Dynamic Relations and Theoretical Contribution

The five dimensions presented above should not be understood as sequential stages of development but as analytically distinguishable aspects of a recursive process. Participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection are closely interrelated and continuously influence one another. Through participation, learners encounter religious language in bodily and symbolic practices. As they perceive these practices, they attend to meaningful forms. By interpreting them, they construct meaning. When they express themselves, they appropriate and reshape religious language. Reflection then changes how they later participate, perceive, interpret, and express meaning. Religious language development is therefore conceptualized as a continuously developing process in which different dimensions may emerge simultaneously, overlap, or recur throughout learning processes. The example of the Advent celebration illustrates this interdependence:

participation in the ritual enables attention to its symbolic features; perception supports interpretation; interpretation informs expression; and reflection reshapes future participation and understanding.

The heuristic value of the model lies in making visible dimensions of religious language development that are often treated separately in existing scholarship. Research on religious education and religious literacy has primarily focused on interpretation, understanding, and communicative competence (Altmeyer 2011; Englert 2013; Dressler 2020), whereas ritual and liturgical studies have emphasized participation, embodiment, and symbolic action (Bell 1992; Meyer-Blanck 2021). The present framework suggests that these perspectives can be understood as complementary dimensions of a common process. Religious language emerges neither through participation alone nor solely through interpretive or reflective activity. Rather, it develops through the interaction of embodied engagement, symbolic perception, meaning-making, linguistic articulation, and critical reflection.

In this respect, the model contributes to current discussions in religious education in two ways. First, it offers an integrative framework that relates insights from practice theory, ritual studies, liturgical studies, and research on religious language. Second, it reconceptualizes liturgical learning as a formative environment for religious language development. Rather than viewing liturgy primarily as an object of instruction or reflection, the model emphasizes its potential as a formative practice of religious language, which is encountered, appropriated, expressed, and transformed. Its purpose is therefore not to provide a universal theory of learning like Kolb (1984), but a heuristic framework for analyzing how religious language may emerge within liturgical learning environments and for guiding future empirical research.

5. Implications

5.1. Implications for Empirical Research

As a heuristic framework, the proposed model is intended not only to provide theoretical orientation but also to support empirical investigation. Its primary contribution lies in offering analytically distinguishable dimensions that can guide the study of religious language development in liturgical learning environments.

Each dimension of the model can be operationalized for empirical research. The dimension of participation draws attention to the ways learners engage in liturgical practices, including verbal, bodily, and communal forms of involvement. Perception focuses on how learners attend to and experience liturgical symbols, gestures, narratives, sounds, and spatial arrangements. Interpretation concerns the meanings learners attribute to these experiences and the ways they connect them with broader religious frameworks. Expression examines how learners articulate religious perceptions and interpretations through spoken, written, symbolic, or creative forms of communication. Finally, reflection investigates how learners become aware of their own processes of meaning-making and negotiate the possibilities and limitations of religious language.

These dimensions may serve as sensitizing concepts in qualitative research. They provide a structure for analyzing observations, interviews and learning products by enabling researchers to identify how different aspects of religious language development become visible in concrete educational settings. At the same time, the model does not assume a fixed sequence of stages. Rather, the dimensions are understood as interrelated and cyclical processes that may occur simultaneously or repeatedly throughout a learning process.

The framework is particularly relevant for studies that investigate liturgical learning in schools and other educational environments. It allows researchers to examine not only whether learners acquire specific religious expressions but also how such expressions emerge through participation in symbolic and communicative practices. In this way, the

model shifts empirical attention from outcomes alone to the processes through which religious language is formed.

Furthermore, the framework can support comparative studies across different liturgical settings and age groups. By providing a common conceptual vocabulary, it enables researchers to analyze similarities and differences in the ways learners engage with religious language in diverse contexts. It may therefore contribute to the development of a more differentiated empirical understanding of the relationship between liturgical participation and religious language development.

Consequently, the model should be understood as a heuristic rather than a deterministic framework. Its value lies in generating research questions, structuring empirical observation, and facilitating the systematic investigation of religious language formation within liturgical learning processes.

An important question for future research concerns the developmental dimension of religious language formation. If liturgical practices can be understood as communicative environments in which religious language is encountered, enacted, interpreted, articulated, and reflected upon, further empirical investigation is needed to explore how these processes unfold over time. In particular, longitudinal studies could examine how repeated participation in communal worship and other liturgical practices contributes to the appropriation, transformation, and use of religious language across different educational and ecclesial contexts.

Beyond its relevance for empirical research, the framework also raises important questions for the design of religious education. If liturgical practices can function as formative spaces for religious language development, then religious education must consider not only how pupils learn about liturgy, but also how they encounter, participate in, and reflect upon liturgical forms as modes of religious communication.

The framework is intentionally heuristic. It does not claim to describe empirical reality exhaustively, nor does it assume that all dimensions are equally visible in every learning situation. Rather, it offers a conceptual vocabulary for investigating how religious language emerges within concrete liturgical learning arrangements. Its analytical value therefore depends on future empirical research capable of refining, extending, or revising the proposed dimensions.

5.2. Implications for Primary Religious Education

The proposed framework suggests a shift in how liturgical learning is conceptualized within religious education. Rather than treating liturgy primarily as an object of instruction or as an occasional pedagogical method, liturgical practices can be understood as communicative environments in which religious language is encountered, enacted, interpreted, articulated, and reflected upon.

From this perspective, liturgical learning involves more than explaining the meaning of rituals, symbols, or prayers or the structure of different forms of worship. Consequently, the educational task of religious education is not merely to explain liturgical language but to design learning environments that intentionally connect participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection. Children develop religious language competence through guided encounters with religious forms of communication. They learn not only what religious expressions mean, but also how religious language functions as a way of interpreting experiences, expressing beliefs, and communicating within a tradition.

This perspective places particular emphasis on the relationship between participation and reflection as performative didactics emphasizes (Mendl 2016b). Participation in liturgical practices alone does not automatically result in religious language development. Educationally meaningful learning emerges when participation is accompanied by opportunities for perception, interpretation, articulation, and reflection. For primary

religious education, this implies that liturgical experiences require pedagogical mediation. Teachers support learning processes by creating spaces in which children can attend to religious meaningful forms, ask questions, express their own interpretations, and develop an increasingly differentiated understanding of religious language.

Although the proposed model is largely age-independent and may also be applied to adolescents and adults, it is particularly relevant for primary religious education. During childhood, rituals often play an important role in processes of meaning-making, orientation, and belonging. Moreover, primary education is characterized by the significance of symbolic learning and performative forms of engagement through which religious meanings are frequently accessed before they can be conceptualized in more abstract ways. Finally, childhood represents a crucial phase of linguistic development, during which expressive and interpretive capacities expand considerably. Against this background, primary school contexts provide especially favorable conditions for observing and fostering the processes of religious language development described in this model.

The framework also highlights the importance of balancing tradition and children's lived experiences (Altmeyer et al. 2022). Religious language should neither be reduced to everyday language nor presented as a fixed vocabulary to be memorized. Instead, children should encounter religious expressions as meaningful symbolic forms that can be explored, interpreted, and appropriated (Meyer-Blanck 2021). In this process, religious education becomes a space where inherited forms of religious communication meet children's own questions, experiences, and attempts to make sense of the world.

For teachers, this understanding implies a specific form of professional competence. Religious educators require not only knowledge of liturgical traditions but also the ability to facilitate processes of perception, interpretation, and reflection. They act as mediators between liturgical practices and children's developing capacities to engage with religious language.

Thus, liturgical learning can be understood as an important dimension of religious education in general and religious language formation in particular: not because participation replaces reflection, but because bodily participation provides the experiential and symbolic basis from which reflective religious communication can emerge.

6. Conclusions

Religious language plays a central role in religious education because it helps learners articulate, interpret, and communicate religious meanings. However, despite increasing attention to religious literacy, meaning-making, and the role of religious practices in learning processes, the relationship between participation in liturgical practices and the development of religious language has remained insufficiently explored. Existing approaches have provided important insights into either the interpretation of religious language or the formative character of religious practices, but an integrated account of how religious language develops through engagement with liturgical practices is still lacking.

This article has addressed this gap by proposing a heuristic framework that conceptualizes religious language development as an iterative process emerging through participation, perception, interpretation, expression, and reflection within liturgical learning environments. Drawing on perspectives from practice theory, ritual studies, liturgical studies, and religious education, the framework understands liturgy not merely as an object of instruction but as a symbolic and communicative environment in which religious language can be encountered, appropriated, and transformed.

The model challenges approaches that conceptualize religious language primarily as knowledge to be transmitted or acquired. Instead, it understands religious language as emerging through participation in symbolic and communicative practices in which meaning is embodied, enacted, interpreted, and articulated. At the same time, the framework avoids

reducing participation to an automatic process of learning. Educationally meaningful liturgical learning requires opportunities for interpretation, expression, and reflection that enable learners to appropriate religious language critically and personally.

The contribution of the proposed framework is therefore not to establish a universal model of learning, but to provide a domain-specific conceptual lens for understanding religious language formation within liturgical contexts. By bringing together perspectives that have often developed separately, the model offers a theoretical connection between discussions of religious language, ritual practice, and liturgical education. It provides a basis for future empirical research investigating how processes of religious language development become visible in concrete educational settings, particularly through qualitative, video-based, and design-based approaches.

As a heuristic framework, the model requires further empirical investigation. Future research should explore how religious language develops over time through repeated participation in communal worship and other liturgical practices. Longitudinal and qualitative studies could examine how learners appropriate, transform, and use religious language across different educational and ecclesial contexts. Such research would contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the relationship between liturgical participation and religious language development.

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