



Be open-minded in a religiously plural world: "In addition to knowledge about religions we also need to acknowledge and understand each other," says Joachim Willems.

Letting Your Views be Challenged

Religion has become a huge social topic once more since the start of the millennium. How can we coexist peacefully in a religiously diverse world? Religion educationalist Joachim Willems is looking for answers

He was young and in love – these thoughts were the last thing he wanted in his life at that point. Joachim Willems was studying Buddhism, hardly an unusual activity for a student of theology, but for Willems it became a defining experience. What if he decided to pursue this philosophy? Wouldn't that mean calling into question his whole worldview and way of life? And by logical extension withdrawing from that life in the quest for serenity; separating from his girlfriend,

entering a monastery and learning to meditate?

Instead of going to live in a Buddhist monastery, Prof. Dr. Dr. Joachim Willems, professor at the University's Institute of Lutheran Theology and Religious Education since spring 2016, kept to his chosen path. But he has never abandoned his intensive study of different religions, and the topic of "interreligious competence" has become the main focus of his research and teaching.

Interreligious competence: for the doctor of theology and education research this is a basic cultural skill that everyone needs in today's religiously pluralistic world. It goes beyond knowledge about different religions to encompass mutual awareness and, ideally, mutual understanding, he explains. It also means questioning whether religion really is behind all those things people suspect, he adds. After all, each individual has their own character and background: "Cultures are not homo-

genous, and nor are religions," stresses Willems, who has made extended visits to Russia throughout his career, where he also carried out the research for both of his dissertations.

A key qualification in the 21st century

Whether the issue is the construction of a mosque in a Christian neighbourhood or the debate about school exams during Ramadan, "interreligious competence is about being able to analyse religious phenomena from different perspectives," says Willems. "This way I can adapt to situations involving interreligious encounters – without the way I react in such situations being predetermined."

This skill has become increasingly important since the start of the new millennium: "Religion disappeared from the radar for a long time, when the focus was on breaking with tradition and secularisation. But around 2001 – as a result of the 9/11 attacks among other factors – it became a big topic once more." Willems explains: "When you watch the news or read a newspaper today, religion is the big issue. But often the focus is not our religion but the religion practised by others. And you realize that this needs to be examined more in depth – be it in sociology, educational science or religious studies." On the back cover of his book on the theory of interreligious competence, he goes so far as to describe it as a "key qualification in the 21st century".

How do young people deal with religious plurality? This is a question Willems is examining in a project funded by the German Research Foundation called "Religious Diversity: Experiencing it, Interpreting it, Evaluating it" (abbreviated as REVIER). Through qualitative analysis of interviews with Christian, Muslim, and non-religious teenagers aged 14 to 19 he is trying to gain insights into their attitudes and worldviews. These views may not be representative, he explains, but simi-

larities allow him to draw conclusions beyond individual cases – which taken on their own as case studies also highlight successes and shortcomings in interreligious coexistence and can serve to increase awareness.

Willems cites the case of a 17-year-old Muslim boy who recalled an incident when his class was singing a Christmas carol during a music lesson. As the boy tells it in the interview, a fellow pupil said to him: "Jesus Christ is born" in a provocative manner, as if to say: "Jesus Christ is in Christianity, see!" The response must have come as a surprise. The Muslim boy said: "Well sure, I actually think it's great that we're singing about it! He was a prophet and did many good things. The Bible itself is one of God's books, so it's part of Islam."

This scenario inspired Willems to develop a concept for an RE lesson – including role playing on potential outcomes before the unexpected ending is revealed – and points to develop in further lessons on Christianity, Islam and interreligious encounters. The father of two put this concept into practice at a school complex in Berlin where he taught during and after his Habilitation.

The insights Willems gained from the 30 interviews he analysed are multifaceted. Talking of his Muslim interviewees, he observes: "Every one of them is aware of the stereotypes prevalent in the non-Islamic majority society and is able to constantly change perspective." For example a schoolgirl wearing a headscarf who told him about a conversation with a teacher. The interesting aspect here, he says, was that the "supposedly pre-modern" and undemocratic schoolgirl defended her right to wear a headscarf citing individual freedoms, while the teacher, who sees herself as a representative of the legal, social and cultural system based on those very freedoms, denied the girl these rights". While the schoolgirl was aware of the other point of view, Willems explains, the teacher was convinced that only her view counted

and represented how the world works. Willems has come across similar cases involving discussions about being allowed to pray during school breaks.

During the REVIER project Willems also observed "how quickly Islam tends to come up when people talk about religion". With Islam, he notes, religious practice becomes visible, and some people only become aware of religion in this context, so only then does it become a topic of discussion. He also sees this with his students, whose interest in interreligious learning is particularly strong when it comes to Islam. Willems has employed an Islam scholar on his team. "Her seminars are full," he says.

Encouraging students to adopt their own positions

For 43-year-old Willems the subject of his professorship, religious education, goes beyond teaching religion to describe specific religious communication processes in different social contexts – not just in schools, but also for example within a church community. Nonetheless, he sees schools as a key location for teaching religious and interreligious competence, "because there is no other place where you can really reach everyone".

He finds subjective points of view particularly important, comparing a religious education lesson that doesn't encourage pupils to develop their own position to "music lessons without the experience of hearing, where the music is only considered abstractly on the basis of sheet music, lines and symbols". He appeals to teachers as well as pupils to allow themselves to be moved, and even challenged – for instance by the partly radical messages contained in biblical stories – to clarify their own position on existential questions. In the same way that he once allowed himself to be challenged by Buddhism. "Something happens with me as an individual when I try to understand the world, when I interact in the world – that's what education is all about." (ds)