

Spirituality and religion in teacher training

Contribution by Carlo Willmann to ITEF meeting on November 19, 2025

Teacher training programs are constantly facing new challenges. One challenge of our time seems to be dealing openly and appropriately with the **diversity of spiritual experiences** and religious beliefs among students. We see great diversity: people from different religions, cultures, and worldviews, and even some who (as yet) have no connection to the spiritual dimension of human existence, are seeking a form of education such as Waldorf education promises to be.

How much space do we give to these often-different ways of life? I fondly remember a Muslim student who always had to seek permission from her imam to do this or that during her training. Certainly, an extreme case, but a good opportunity to practice genuine patience and tolerance and not to feel arrogance and know-it-allism because the student was supposedly not independent. In reality, it took her much more self-confidence, effort, and courage to tackle her studies than many others.

How do we talk to students about this? What are the prerequisites for this? An important prerequisite, it seems to me, is to reflect on our own view of spirituality and discuss it with the students. An open concept of spirituality seems particularly important here. **Spirituality** then does not mean a particular direction, religion, or worldview. Rather, it is the **fundamental gift of being human**, the opportunity to become aware of one's own spirituality and to connect with the spirituality of the world. The great cultural achievements of human history, **science, art, and religion are expressions of human spirituality**. Religions have no primacy in this, even if they seem or should seem to be closest to spirituality on the surface. Isn't all good art imbued with spirituality, regardless of whether it professes this or not? Rudolf Steiner's mission seems to me to have been, in particular, to spiritualize science, a mission that must be taken seriously, especially in teacher training.

This means viewing the phenomena of the world from a spiritual perspective, as Goetheanism or anthroposophy do, and teaching this methodically in training courses. But are more direct forms of spiritual action also possible? Would it be appropriate, for example, to offer meditation courses as part of a degree program? Could something like this be understood as an attempt at manipulation? Or would it correspond to a real longing on the part of the students, and would spiritual training be a genuine task in teacher training?

After all, Rudolf Steiner demanded that if **pedagogy** is to be truly educational, it must **bring science, art, and religion to becoming more alive**; only then will they find resonance in the souls of the students.

I am now interested in the question of how our resources are organized to train our students to cultivate a living religion in schools. Every school certainly does this in its own way. But how do we prepare our students for this?

This is a very sensitive topic for many, many different reasons, and it is not easy to talk about it. However, it helps us to keep in mind what Rudolf Steiner understood by religion in education.

For him, it was not about the content of a religion, its teachings, its practices, its rituals, etc., but about the **religiosity inherent in human beings**, which gives rise to religions in the first place. For Steiner, religiosity is a constitutive element of human existence, a **potential** inherent in every human being that needs to be developed:

“To educate human beings holistically, and to deepen the religiosity of these holistically educated human beings – that is something we have sought to comprehend as one of the most meaningful tasks of the Waldorf school impulse.”

- Rudolf Steiner, Ilkley, August 15, 1923

He explains to the teachers at the first Waldorf school that religion actually lives in **feelings and will**, not in the head or in professing a religion. Religion lives in the deeper layers of the human being. In order to achieve this religiosity, it is necessary to touch these layers, just as it is necessary to shape what we see or experience as religion in such a way that it reaches these depths.

Teacher training therefore also involves making students aware of these layers, enabling them to experience them within themselves, and paying close attention to these areas in children and young people. Children have a natural spirituality within them and want to use it to discover and experience the world. Steiner names qualities that help **to resonate with children's spirituality**. These are values in which children can (unconsciously) recognize their spirituality and which can accompany them throughout their lives, such as gratitude and love, energy and trust, wonder and humility, and many more. For religious education in particular, Steiner emphasized the importance of the emotional warmth that should surround everything in order to allow these values to grow in the child.

Steiner understood this emotion- and will-oriented form of religious education as a general religious education, a kind of propaedeutics on which a specific religious education of a particular religion or denomination could then be built.

And that is what is special and valuable about it: religious education in Waldorf schools in the class teacher area can be practiced independently of any particular religion: it is open to all religions and all cultures.

When we discuss these topics with the students, important questions arise: Where do I stand as a prospective teacher, what is my relationship with this? How far can I, may I, must I go?

There are three steps to religious learning: we learn **about, with, and in** religions.

When we want to learn **about** religions, we learn important information about them, but we don't need to immerse ourselves in them; we grasp their content **cognitively**. If we want to learn **from** religions, we connect with them to a certain extent: we allow ourselves to be impressed by their strengths (and weaknesses) and ask ourselves how we want to relate to them, and we feel an **emotional** connection. If we want to learn **within** a religion, we immerse ourselves in it and seek to practice its rituals, actions, and ethos in our lives, connecting with it through our **will**.

Discussing these aspects with students seems to me to be a significant part of the path to becoming a Waldorf teacher. What role can I play in this, how deep can I go, how authentically can I behave? These are exciting questions that, for whatever reason, should not be left out.

It must be unmistakably clear that the decision on such questions is left to each individual in complete **freedom**. As trainers, we are only those who raise questions about this, and we should ask them first and foremost about ourselves.

Carlo Willmann, November 2025