

What is the religious element in school?

Waldorf education in focus / by Gise Kayser-Gantner

Monday morning, 7.45 hours, it is cold. Students are crossing the schoolyard of a Waldorf school and are heading towards the main entrance. All sorts of hair, caps and hoods - a whole crowd of students wrapped in warm coats arrive at the building. Everybody shakes hands with the teacher at the entrance.

More than 900 students attend the Freie Waldorfschule in Frankfurt/Main. The international flair is reflected in the classrooms; students of other nations belong to every day life.

Waldorf schools all over the world – not a question of religion

There are Waldorf schools almost everywhere in the world; not only in Europe but also on other continents. They have one thing in common: they work on the basis of Waldorf education but this education is realized in very different ways that reflect the individual country and its culture. Waldorf kindergartens and schools can be found in Egypt, in Israel and Palestine, on the Philippines and in India, but also in Japan, Thailand and Taiwan: in Christian as well as in non-Christian cultures.

Religious elements are an important component of Waldorf education and are found in all school subjects. They should, however, not be mistaken for religious instruction in the sense of any specific faith or denomination; but they rather characterize a certain prevailing mood which is independent of any religious confession and which can be found in all religions.

We would like to illustrate this by two examples taken from every day life of Waldorf schools.

Buddhism and Waldorf schools

Are Buddhism and Waldorf schools compatible? Four years ago Thich Thien Son, head of the Phat Hue pagoda, a Buddhist monastery in Frankfurt/Main, tried to get an answer to this question. He looked for a school for Hue Bao, a little monk, whom he had taken into care when he was 3 years old and who should now go to school.

It was not easy to find a suitable school because every-day school life and teaching methods should be in accordance with Hue Bao's life in a Buddhist pagoda. **Waldorf-hessen** asked Dagobert Ossa, member of the pagoda and person in charge of Hue Bao, some questions.

Waldorf-hessen: Mr. Ossa, why did you choose a Waldorf school for Hue Bao?

Dagobert Ossa: Before we decided in favour of a Waldorf school we checked a number of other schools. In the end we decided to send Hue Bao to a Waldorf school as it seemed to complement his every-day life in the monastery. Today we can say that this decision was right.

Waldorf-hessen: At first Hue Bao's personal circumstances seem rather exceptional. He is only seven years old and already a monk in a pagoda. How do the teachers deal with this fact?

Dagobert Ossa: Hue Bao's life is not as unusual as it might seem here in Germany. In Asia it is quite normal that children at that early age are entrusted in the care of a pagoda for a couple of years.

Our decision in favour of a Waldorf school was mainly influenced by the fact that the teachers were ready to accept Hue Bao as what he is. They understood for instance that his robe is more than a garment that can be taken off any time. They were able to understand that it is part of his spiritual path. He grew up in the temple in that robe and he knows that this robe and his plait belong to his being a monk. That is essential for him.

Waldorf-hessen: Are there no problems when it comes to garments for eurhythm or sports lessons?

Dagobert Ossa: No, there were no problems. We want him to take part in the lessons just as well as his class mates. That means, yes, he shall join in. He can take off his robe for this purpose, but he should put it on again afterwards. For physical education he can knot his robe accordingly or even take it off if he feels too restricted— there are no differences between our Buddhist view and the requirements of the school.

Waldorf-hessen: How is the relationship between parents and class mates and the young monk?

Dagobert Ossa: At parent-teacher meetings of course we asked whether the parents or teachers knew of any problems or tensions. But were none. Hue Bao is treated as everybody else. He invites his classmates to his home, to the temple. And his classmates invite him to their homes. He is perfectly well integrated into the class.

Waldorf-hessen: Waldorf schools attach great importance to the Christian traditions. What are Hue Bao's reactions?

Dagobert Ossa: In the Christmas play he bitterly complained about only being a sheep because he would have nothing to say! He would have preferred to play the part of Joseph. Quite obviously there is no problem for him, nor in any other festivity where he joins in with utmost pleasure – during Carnival he will disguise himself just as the others – and even carry a sword. This is not a problem for the monks of the pagoda. For the deep concern of our community to build a bridge between Buddhism, other religions, other cultures or groups involved is put into practice on an every day level.

Waldorf-hessen: Religious instruction is part of the Waldorf schedule. The students can chose between denominational and free religious instruction. What was your choice?

Dagobert Ossa: It was neither Abbot Thich Thien Son nor myself who made the choice. Hue Bao could choose himself. He decided in favour of free religious instruction. He should not have the feeling, "I am excluded from something".

Waldorf-hessen: The daily routine of a monk in a pagoda is filled with many duties. How does this go together with day-to-day school life?

Dagobert Ossa: For Hue Bao school comes always first. He likes to take part in some of the Buddhist ceremonies here in the monastery. He is not yet fully integrated into all of the duties of a monk but slowly adapts to the tasks appropriate for his age – and without any pressure.

(further informations: www.phathue.de)

(Interview: Gise Kayser-Gantner)

Change of scene

In the Waldorf school in Dietzenbach everybody had got used to seeing Singh Khalsa in the morning bring his children to school. Being a Sikh of course he wears his turban and his beard uncut. **Waldorf-hessen** asked him about his children and school.

Waldorf-hessen: Your children went to the Waldorf kindergarten and also to the Waldorf School. What made you chose Waldorf?

SJS. Khalsa: My wife and I wanted to send our children to a school where they would get an appropriate and suitable education. We found that Kindergarten as well as school was exactly what we expected. Another reason for this choice was our intention to give them a deeper insight into their Christian environment.

Waldorf-hessen: Did you feel accepted and supported or rather hindered in your religion by Waldorf education?

SJS. Khalsa: As the Sikh-Dharma is not so much a religion but a spiritual way of life this was always treated with tolerance and sympathy throughout kindergarten as well as school time.

Waldorf-hessen: Did you or your children have any problems when Christian events were celebrated in school?

SJS. Khalsa: No, this was never a problem for us because at home we complemented these celebrations by telling our children the Sikh-history and the stories connected with it.

Waldorf-hessen: Did you feel supported or rather hindered in your religious education by the Waldorf school? Or did it have no influence at all?

SJS. Khalsa: We cannot deny a certain influence. But we never had the feeling of being indoctrinated. Even our traditional headdress (turban) was always tolerated and never lead to any problems. We follow our own way and try to live the Sikh-Dharma as well as we can! Of course our feast-days coincide only very rarely with a weekend. And still we celebrate them with love and thus instruct our children in the traditions and customs of the Sikh-Dharma. The reality looks like this; here are Christmas presents for our children, we sing Christian Christmas songs and take part in the Christmas festivities in school. On Guru Ghadi Day, one of our feast-days, they are also given presents and are told stories of the Guru's life. For us, festivities in the Waldorf community are not so much religious ceremonies but rather spiritual festivities.

As a matter of fact my children could find their own way. Whether this is Sikh-Dharma or another orientation - it is not so important for me. In any case I would always decide again in favour of Waldorf education as in our times it seems to me to be the best choice for spiritually-orientated parents.