

Theory and Practice in Interreligious Exchange

Experiences and Reflections of a University Seminar on Christian-Muslim Dialogue

1. Introduction: The Genesis of the Continuous Seminar “Interfaith Learning” at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU)¹

Interreligious dialogue and interreligious learning are both theoretical and practical concepts of theology and religious education that have been developed in order to reduce prejudices, engage in constructive professional exchange and, last but not least, strengthen peaceful coexistence and social cohesion—especially in pluralistic and multicultural societies. Daycare centres, universities and religious communities are common places where interfaith education can be found. Furthermore, interfaith issues bear significant relevance within the social, historical and cultural sciences, especially in theology and religious studies. In these two disciplines, comparative and interreligious studies as well as intertextual approaches have been developing more systematically and scientifically, particularly since the establishment of Islamic theological institutes at German and Austrian universities.²

1 A first, smaller report by the authors on the inter-theological cooperation in the seminar “Interreligious Learning” has been published in German in the *Gießener Universitätsblätter* 57 (2024), 75–84. This text has been translated using AI and has been reviewed by Patrick Brooks, Deborah Grün and Sebastian Alt as well as by the authors. We would like to thank them very much.

2 A decisive factor in the establishment of Islamic theological institutes and chairs in Germany was the correspondingly recommending report by the German Council of Science and Humanities from 2010: *Wissenschaftsrat: Empfehlung zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen*

At Justus Liebig University in Giessen, intensive interreligious cooperation has also developed in recent years between lecturers of Catholic, Protestant and Islamic theology, particularly as a result of the establishment of Islamic theology and religious education (winter semester 2011/12) and the implementation of corresponding degree programmes in the field of Islamic theology.³ Since autumn 2011, the representatives of the three theologies have regularly exchanged ideas and cooperated with each other, both at the level of teaching and in the area of research and public education (“third mission”). The first mutual visits, brainstorming sessions and expert discussions quickly resulted in practical cooperation which, apart from structural communication in a joint “Theologicum”⁴, comprised interreligious study programmes, joint seminars, lectures and publications.⁵

The aforementioned threefold cooperation (teaching, research, third mission) between the theological institutes and chairs (teaching, research, third mission) was brought together under the umbrella of the Focus Area “Theology /ies, Diversity, Society”, which is located at the Department 04 of History and Cultural Studies (and which will be explained in more detail in chapter 2 below), from 2019, when the scope of Islamic theology at Giessen was expanded to include a professorship which focused on Muslim lifestyles.

Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen, on the Internet at: https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/9678-10.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2 (Last accessed 9 Mar. 2025), cf. *ibid.*, 74 ff. on the establishment of theologically oriented Islamic studies in Germany.

3 One of the greatest specific features of the cooperation between the theologies in Giessen is the location of the theological institutes and chairs within the same faculty, the Department 04 for History and Cultural Studies <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/institute/index>, accessed 9 Mar. 2025), which forms a very good institutional framework for trilateral cooperation.

4 The “Theologicum” — which takes place at least once a semester — is a forum for the three theological institutes. In this context, theologians of three theological traditions can report their academic activities, plan further cooperation and discuss several topics relevant to research and teaching.

5 For example, Yaşar Sarıkaya and Franz-Josef Bäumer jointly published an anthology in 2017. (Sarıkaya & Bäumer, 2017). The commemorative publication for Franz-Josef Bäumer was also published in 2019 in collaboration between the three theological institutes with the participation of academics from other institutes. (Kreutzer, Meuser, Novian & Schmidt, 2019).

This article focuses on one of the most fruitful examples of this joint work: These are courses on interreligious learning,⁶ which have been offered continuously since the summer semester of 2012 in team teaching (between Catholic and Islamic theology). Against this background, the following questions will be explored in this article:

- What is the conceptual and structural framework of the seminar?
- What are the didactic guidelines that determine the overall concept of the seminar, its content and methodology?
- What are the main objectives?
- What are the topics or subject areas that are covered?
- How is the seminar received by the students?
- What practical effects / ideas / synergies can be developed from the seminar for a lively dialogue at the level of teaching, research and the third mission?

The article will pay special attention to the connection between the concept, implementation and acceptance of the event as well as to its institutional context, i.e. the cooperation between the theologies at the University of Giessen. The article is intended as a report on experiences and as a reflection on interreligious learning in a specific university context. It can serve as a possible impetus to initiate a comparative and mutually beneficial discussion on higher education, didactic experiences and insights gained at different universities with their respective (teaching) conditions.

2. The Focus Area “Theology/ies, Plurality, Society”

An important pillar of the institutionalised cooperation between Giessen’s theologies (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic), is the aforementioned Focus Area “Theology/ies, Diversity, Society”, which is laid out in the so-called “Liebig Concept”, i.e. the strategy paper for re-

6 The seminars were initiated by Franz-Josef Bäumer and Yaşar Sarıkaya in the summer semester of 2012 and have been held regularly once a year ever since, with the exception of one seminar during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. in the summer semester of 2020.

search at the University of Giessen.⁷ The three keywords that highlight this cooperation between Giessen's theologies are intertwined concepts. Altogether, they describe the rough outlines of its concern and content.⁸

Diversity: In the symbolic centre of the triad "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society" is the central examination of the phenomenon of diversity that is typical of pluralistic late-modern society, with a clear focus on religious diversity (admittedly in combination with other diversities, such as gender, culture, classes, milieus, lifestyles, etc.).⁹ In terms of reflecting on multi-, inter- and trans-religiosity, the focus is on religious traditions in their plurality ("multi-"), in their mutual interaction processes ("inter-") and in their overlaps, fusions and hybridisations ("trans-"). According to the participating chairs, the Protestant Christian, Catholic Christian and Sunni-Muslim major traditions are particularly focused on, without other religious traditions being ignored. In particular, the consideration of the religion and tradition of Judaism, also in terms of its current social significance, is an important concern for the sponsors of this specialisation area.

Theology/ies: Being labelled as a Focus Area of theology/ies with plurality at its centre means that the three theologies represent both its subject and object. The subjects, institutional sponsors of the co-

7 Focus areas are described as follows: "The Focus Areas of the departments (AB, abbreviation of the German term "Akzentbereiche") are research areas to which JLU commits itself as special focus in its research profile due to strategic considerations (e.g. visibility of a subject area as a kind of academic trademark, social responsibility of JLU) and which it promotes accordingly. Focus Areas are often located in the transitional area between individual research and collaborative research and are led by one or more departments. Focus Areas can develop into areas of potential ("Potentialbereiche") but can also be permanently organised as small high-performance units." (Justus Liebig University Giessen, n.d., "The Liebig Concept", <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/forschung/dateien/the-liebig-concept> (Last accessed 9 Mar. 2025).

8 The website of the focus area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society" can be found at: <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie%28n%29> (Last accessed 9 Mar. 2025).

9 For initial orientation and a nuanced critical examination of the concept of diversity, under the history of the term and contemporary discourses, cf. Nieswand, 2013.

operative project, are the participating chairs of theology,¹⁰ in interaction with non-theological perspectives. In addition, the focus on theology (in the singular of this perspective of reflection as well as in the plural of religious studies anchored in different religious traditions) is considered an object of academic reflection. From among the different dimensions of religions, particular consideration is given to the way they are rationalised within their (academic) theologies. The university level is particularly taken into consideration here.¹¹ In this respect, the Focus Area examines the theoretical foundations and social relevance of self-reflection on religious traditions from an internal perspective, which, of course, must always be in exchange with the external perspective. The Focus Area sees itself as a cooperative and comparative body of self-reflection for the different theologies at the university, which is embedded in a plural and diverse society itself. In this respect, the Focus Area has explicit theoretical, sociological and socio-ethical dimensions.

Society: As already mentioned in the title keywords “diversity” and “theology/ies”, the social relevance of the Focus Area is central to its self-image. The Focus Area represents both an image that reflects and a forum for reflection on a pluralistic, i.e. multi-religious and post-secular¹² society. In this context, it is helpful to distinguish between several aspects of the concept of pluralism, as the sociologist of knowledge and religion Peter L. Berger does: With regard to the existence of both explicitly religious and explicitly non-religious world views and perspectives, Berger speaks of double pluralism, which consists in the “co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses”.¹³ In addition, Berger

10 A total of nine chairs for Protestant (four), Catholic (three) and Islamic theology (two) are involved; cf. on the professors: [https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie\(n\)/personen](https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie(n)/personen) (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

11 See also the recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities on the further development of theologies and religion-related sciences at German universities (Wissenschaftsrat, 2010) and on the specifics of theologies in overlap with and in distinction to religious studies perspectives, for example. Kreutzer, 2017, offers a Catholic theological perspective on this.

12 The term “post-secular”, which describes the coexistence of religious and secular options, was prominently introduced by the well-known social philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 2001). Further discussions on the topic can be found in the anthology by Gmainer-Pranzl & Rettenbacher, 2013, among others.

13 Berger 2014, IX.

also distinguishes between *descriptive plurality* as the mere coexistence of different world views and religions on the one hand, and *normative pluralism* as the successful coexistence of diverse groups, cultures, religions and world views on the other. “Pluralism is a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, world views, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.”¹⁴ The Focus Area adopts these two differentiations. On the one hand, it seeks to analyse and explore the social presence of neighbouring religious and non-religious groups as well as that of different forms of expression and discourses through a variety of perspectives based on different religious traditions, hermeneutical approaches and theological disciplines. On the other hand, from a theological perspective focused on normative claims to validity, thought is given to the successful (“peaceful” and “amicable”; Berger) coexistence of different religious and non-religious groups, cultures, discourses and world views. *If these perspectives are synthesised, the Focus Area is essentially concerned with reflecting on productive contributions from religious traditions (with a focus on Protestant, Catholic and Islamic faiths) and from their (institutionalised) self-rationalisation (“theology/ies”) for a pluralistic society—in Berger’s positive normative sense.* In this respect, for example, topics such as the diversity of holy scriptures (Bible, Qur’an) and traditions (Hadith and Sunna, highlights of church history, e.g. the Reformation, confessionalisation) in their respective historical contexts, political theologies and religious ethics, theological research into emotions, religions in social fields and lifeworlds, processes of secularisation and their theological interpretations (e.g. the concept of the “death of God”), interreligious education (e.g. the future of (trans-)denominational religious education), migration research, religious radicalisation, racism and religion as well as theological gender perspectives.¹⁵

The impetus for the Focus Area from the Liebig Concept’s research strategy was taken up from the outset in such a way that it

14 Berger 2014, 1.

15 See the projects of the AB: [https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie\(n\)/Projekte](https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie(n)/Projekte), as well as the publications related to them: [https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie\(n\)/veroeffentlichungen](https://www.uni-giessen.de//de/fbz/fb04/akzentbereiche/Theologie(n)/veroeffentlichungen) (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

was linked to cooperation at the levels of research, teaching and the university's third mission. Individual activities at these levels can be cited as examples: At the level of *research*, there is a joint academic book series entitled "Theology in a plural society", joint publications,¹⁶ a joint research colloquium by the three Giessen theologies, in which primarily papers for university qualifications are presented and discussed, and research projects that are anchored in the respective theologies but mostly have interreligious and inter-theological references. At the *teaching* level, for example, there is interreligious team teaching in courses (such as the seminar on interreligious learning presented here), interreligious modules in the individual theological study programmes¹⁷ and the courses offered jointly by the theologies in the ethics teaching degree programmes at JLU.¹⁸ The *third mission*, the public presence of university activities in society, is naturally a central concern of the Focus Area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society". For example, the three theologies are jointly responsible for an annual *Dies Academicus*, which is aimed at a wider audience, with high-profile topics, an "Evening Lecture on Culture and Religion" (in the winter semester 23/24, for example, on "Anthropology and Theology/ies from an Interreligious Perspective") and other lecture formats.

In this respect, the (meanwhile) institutionalised seminar "Interreligious Learning: Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue" (see below) is an elaborate, multidimensional format that links the three university levels (research, teaching and the third mission) both

16 See volume 1 of the aforementioned series *Theologie in pluraler Gesellschaft* ("Theology in a Plural Society"), the anthology by Çakir-Mattner, David & Kreutzer (2022) entitled *Theologie(n) und Modernisierung. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven aus Judentum, Christentum und Islam* ("Theology/ies und Modernization. Interdisciplinary perspectives from Judaism, Christianity and Islam").

17 This is the case, for example, in the BA programmes in History and Cultural Studies with the subjects Contextual Islamic Studies or Catholic Theology at JLU, Giessen.

18 This applies to the teacher training programmes for primary school (L1) and secondary school (L2), each with ethics as a subject at JLU, Giessen. (For a summary of the examination and module regulations of JLU, Giessen, including the degree programmes mentioned, see: <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/mug/7> (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025)).

thematically and at the level of activities. It remains a challenge to achieve positive results from this strong institutional and content-related localisation and anchoring of the seminar and to stimulate an understanding among the participating students from which they benefit. The following didactic considerations on the seminar and the analyses of student feedback can be seen in this context.

3. The Seminar “Interreligious Learning: Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue”

As already mentioned, the seminar “Interreligious Learning: Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue” has been held every summer semester since 2012—with slight changes to the title and content each time.¹⁹ Due to its regularity, systematic conception and complexity of content as well as its practical theological effects and practical relevance, this course offers a sustainable, sincere dialogue between teachers and students of the two institutes for Catholic and Islamic theology.

The seminar is based on a series of social, cultural and theological prerequisites and framework conditions, which are briefly outlined below:

Social, theological and pedagogical background to the course

The social reality: As already highlighted, German society has become more multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual—in Leimgruber’s words “more colourful”—in the last half century than ever before in its history, primarily as a result of migration and globalisation.²⁰ This change is most evident in kindergartens, schools and universities. In the first grade of a primary school in Giessen, for example, pupils from ethnically, culturally and religiously di-

19 There are also other examples of team teaching between the three theologies. One example is the Protestant/Islamic theological seminar “Scriptural Reasoning — in dialogue about texts from the Bible and Koran” by Ute Eva Eisen and Naime Çakir-Mattner in the summer semester of 2022.

20 Leimgruber 2007.

verse backgrounds sit side by side. The same applies to university lecture theatres. This development brings with it a number of social, political and educational challenges, which include, for example, the issue of mutual distrust between “native” people, who are primarily Christian or secular, and “immigrants”, many of whom are Muslim,²¹ which can be based on deep-rooted prejudices from history and experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, as revealed in the regular surveys conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation’s *Religion Monitor*.²² In this context, the interfaith seminars are based on the need to make a positive contribution to the strengthening of civilian understanding and an “inclusive sense of unity” in light of the aforementioned challenges of multiethnicity etc., as envisaged by the Bertelsmann Foundation.²³

Theological interdependence: Although there are many elements that connect Christianity and Islam (e.g. common origin, central figures such as Abraham, Jesus, Mary, etc.), the tensions, rivalries and even wars between members of these two religions, which are mostly due to political will to power and the desire for supremacy, often take precedence over mutual interest in getting to know each other, understanding, dialogue or empathy. One of the theological foundations and academic motivations for this seminar is the close relationship of the religious scriptures of both religions. As the religious scholar Stefan Schreiner points out, the Qur’an and the Bible, for example, “are connected, and this is not a one-way street; on the contrary, the connection between the two scriptures seems to be a mutual relationship that can be described as interdependence”.²⁴ Schreiner therefore describes the Qur’an “as an interpretation of the Bible—the Bible as an aid to understanding the Qur’an”.²⁵ From an Islamic perspective, this closer connection can be illustrated particularly in Qur’anic narratives. The Qur’an contains many stories that

21 Strictly speaking, the term “Christian and Muslim” does not refer to religious affiliation and practice, but rather to a kind of cultural identity and self-perception.

22 See https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/51_Religion-monitor/Zusammenfassung_der_Sonderauswertung.pdf (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

23 This intention corresponds to Berger’s normative pluralism.

24 Schreiner 2019, 41–60. Transl.

25 Schreiner 2010, 167–183. Transl.

refer to biblical and non-biblical narratives. As the Innsbruck-based Muslim theologian Abdullah Takim notes, the Qur'an is therefore "a multi-referential, written, orally transmitted word that reflects on itself and the other Holy Scriptures".²⁶

As far as Christian theology is concerned, the interest in Islam and its religious sources is particularly evident in the context of the comparative theology approach, among others. In an intertextual reading, this model can offer the opportunity to gain new perspectives on one's own faith.

In short, cooperative seminars can provide new impetus and synergies for interreligious cooperation, both in theological–historical studies (e.g. genesis and exegesis of religious scriptures, Christian–Islamic tensions and polemics, interactions, intertextuality, etc.) and in relation to current challenges in the context of religion and society (plurality, diversity, violence, etc.).

School and university education: The environments in which ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and multilingualism manifest themselves most clearly are kindergartens, schools and universities. In this respect, religious pluralism, mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence and dialogue are among the important overarching goals and competences of all curricula. Against this background, it is an educational necessity to enable future kindergarten and schoolteachers, theologians and religious personnel to accept the respective other as they are and to live together with them on the basis of shared values in a culture of mutual acceptance in educational processes from kindergarten to higher education.

The seminars on interreligious learning have been held continuously since 2012 on the basis of these prerequisites and objectives in team teaching between the Catholic religious education professor Franz-Josef Bäumer and the Islamic religious education professor Yaşar Sarıkaya (until the summer semester 2019) and between the Catholic systematic theologian Ansgar Kreutzer and Yaşar Sarıkaya (since the summer semester 2021). The courses have been well received and attended by students from both institutes—and even by students of ethics. In some semesters, they even achieved the highest number of participants in the entire range of courses offered by the two institutes. In two semesters, several students had to be excluded,

26 Takim 2007, 156. Transl.

and they had to postpone their participation until the following semester.

Despite a noticeable hesitancy in the first few weeks, the students take the special opportunity to get to know each other, work together in groups and discuss during the remainder of the semester. This is not only about working out the “common core” (“gemeinsamer Kern”), as Johannes Lähnemann²⁷ and Stefan Leimgruber²⁸ point out, but also about the willingness to deal with one’s own faith in a self-critical and varying way, as Abdoljawad Falaturi presupposes to ensure a successful dialogue.²⁹ As a smaller survey analysed in the following section (Chapter 4) shows, all these activities bring the students closer together, create respectful interaction and help to reduce prejudices. This undoubtedly contributes positively to their view of themselves and others.

The first three weeks of the course usually include a theoretical and theological introduction to interreligious learning by the lecturers. In this context, the theological foundation as well as sociological justification of interreligious dialogue are of central importance. In the following weeks, students usually give presentations in pairs or groups on the topics they have worked on as part of the seminar programme. Care is taken to ensure that the groups are made up of students from different degree programmes (Catholic Theology, Islamic Theology, Ethics), in order to enable the exchange of multiple perspectives—even beyond the seminar itself/sessions themselves, as the students have to conduct their preparations together in mixed pairs or small groups. The presentations are based on relevant literature, which is also made available as part of the seminar’s syllabus. Each presentation is followed by a question-and-answer session and an evaluation.

The group work and the discussions (see the ratings in the survey below) are noteworthy for the (active) practice of/engagement in dialogue. The students have the opportunity to express, reflect on and analyse their experiences, observations and even prejudices with regard to the topic at hand. In this way, they can openly address misinformation and prejudices and gain new experiences. All these

27 Lähnemann 2017, 84 f.

28 Leimgruber 2007, 74 f.

29 Falaturi 1996, 160 f.

interactive processes can not only reduce mutual prejudices, but can also lead to mutual learning, empathy and reconciliation as well as to the ability to reflect on one's own views and habits.

Finally, it deserves to be mentioned here that in the last two years, 12th grade students of Catholic religious education from Giessen took part in a seminar session, which gave them an insight into university teaching and interreligious dialogue at an academic level. In the future, it would be useful to extend such visits to other schools and parts of society, both for cooperation between universities, schools and the public and for the promotion of interfaith dialogue beyond Giessen University.

Subject: Theological and Religious Education Topics as Food for Thought and the use of Media

Against the background of the aforementioned conceptual paradigms, the content of the seminars can be divided into three main blocks:

The *first block*, “*Foundations*”, deals with an introduction to the theory and theology of interreligiosity, as well as the foundations of interreligious learning from a Christian and Islamic theological perspective. For Catholic Christianity, the decrees of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65)—especially the document *Nostra Aetate* on the relationship of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions—are discussed as the most striking, clearest and strongest theological basis for interreligious dialogue. For an Islamic justification, on the other hand, those verses of the Qur’an take centre stage which directly or indirectly express religious pluralism or explain diversity in terms of divine will.³⁰ This theological foundation is further developed through sociological theories and justifications as well as their embedding in the context of religious, cultural and social tensions, conflicts and discourses that pluralism in multicultural societies entails.

30 Qur’an: 5/48; 2/62; 49/13. In this context, the “Common Word” of 2007 is also an interesting source of inspiration. For more information, see e.g.: https://www.acommonword.com/downloads/CW-Booklet-Final-v6_8-1-09.pdf (Last accessed 9 Dec. 2024). See also: Brooks 2020.

The *second block*, “*Topics*”, deals with the main themes of Christian and Islamic theology. These include God and images of God, the understanding of revelation and prophecy, prophets (especially Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad), holy scriptures (especially the Bible and Qur’an), religious places and their functions, and religious practices and rituals. On the basis of these elementary theological topics, central convergences and differences between Islam and Christianity are worked out and discussed in groups or in plenary sessions.

The *third block*, “*Fields of practice*”, focuses on practical theology and religious education. Against the backdrop of discussions about religious freedom / religious education, sacred spaces (churches and mosques) and schools are discussed as fields of action for interreligious learning. Of central importance here are the questions of the necessity of interreligious learning and the tasks and goals associated with them as well as the opportunities offered by and limitations of denominational religious education in schools. A special look is taken at textbooks of the other religion “from the inside” and “from the outside” in order to find out whether and to what extent mutual prejudices, clichés or stereotypes still play a role. It becomes clear that interreligious and intercultural learning is not only a necessary concern of Islamic and Christian religious education and school culture as a whole but also imparts key competences in a multi-religious and multicultural society.

A particular highlight of the seminars are the excursions to Giessen’s “places of worship”, which are organised as part of the “Fields of Practice” block with a focus on “sacred spaces”. There are a total of four mosques in Giessen, two of which have been visited. Founded in 1977, the Turkish–Islamic Community of Giessen e. V. (Türkisch-Islamische Gemeinde zu Gießen) has the largest membership and is part of the umbrella organisation of the Turkish–Islamic Union of the Institute for Religion (DİTİB).³¹ The two-storey *Bait us-Samad* (“House of the Absolute”) mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Germany (AMJ), which opened in 2021, is located in

31 For further information, see: <https://ditibgiessen.jimdofree.com/%C3%BCberuns/> (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

its immediate vicinity.³² Both associations, i.e. the DİTİB and AMJ, are religious communities that are recognised by the Hessian state government as partners in the Islamic religious education offered at public schools in Hessen and they are representative of the diversity within the Islamic spectrum.

There are three Catholic churches in Giessen, all of which have already been visited at least once as part of the seminar.³³ In the last two years, the group went to St. Thomas More Church (St. Thomas Morus-Kirche), which was built after the Second World War as a result of increased migration by Catholics to Giessen.³⁴ The church and its history offer a good opportunity to talk about migration and having a minority status as a religious community or about the desire/necessity to have representative sacred buildings. Theologically, the church interior of St. Thomas More is strongly influenced by the Second Vatican Council.³⁵

The excursions are divided into three parts in terms of content and theme:

1. *information*: This involves brief information about the host community and about the construction and architectural features of the church visited, which is usually provided by the staff there.
2. *papers or presentations*. The students who have worked on the relevant topic in the respective week give a presentation on the religious significance and function of places of worship in Christianity and Islam, using the example of the church or mosque visited (usually in groups of two or three).
3. *exchange* between the visitors and the (religious) staff of the host congregation. This usually takes place in the form of introductions and questions and answers but also gives participants the opportunity to meet each other in person, exchange ideas

32 For further information. see Berghöfer 2021 / Official website of the Ahmadiyya community: <https://ahmadiyya.de/gebetsstaette/moscheen/giesen/> (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

33 These are the churches of St. Boniface (St. Bonifatius), St. Albertus and St. Thomas More (St. Thomas Morus) in the city of Giessen.

34 For more information on the beginnings of the parish: <https://bistummainz.de/pfarrei/giessen-st-thomas-morus/pfarrei/anfaenge/> (Last accessed 13 Mar. 2025).

35 Cf. from a wealth of literature, e.g. Renz 2014.

and engage in discussions. Thus, many students come into direct contact with representatives of the religious communities, get to know them on site and get impressions on a personal basis. In other words, interfaith dialogue is *experienced* in a practical and direct way.

4. Results of a Small-Scale Survey in the Seminar and (First/Instant) Conclusions

Intentions and Questionnaire

The reflections presented here are open for discussion. They are based on experiences with the seminar “Interreligious learning. Fundamentals of Islamic–Christian Dialogue” and should not only be based on the institutional framework (chapter 2) and the didactic and conceptual considerations (chapter 3), but also on the participants’ feedback. For this purpose, a straightforward, two-page questionnaire was created, which contained closed and open questions and enabled initial quantitative and qualitative analyses.³⁶ This questionnaire was handed out in the final session of the seminar in the summer semester 2023 and took around 15 minutes to be filled out. Sociometric data was collected (gender, age, semester, subjects) as well as data on the students’ reasons for attending the seminar, the content of the seminar (in the area of interreligious di-

36 Methodologically elaborated studies on a similar topic—relating to interreligious learning in a university context—have been reflected on in the following publications: Kürzinger & Schneider 2018 use statistical indicators and correlations to identify factors for favourable learning outcomes in the sense of better self-perception and self-reflection of religious positioning. In Ratzke n.d. / Ratzke 2021, one of the aims is to empirically evaluate the method of learning through encounters to build interreligious competence and to draw conclusions from the university context examined and apply them to a school context. A kind of meta-study could make interesting comparisons between interreligious university learning and teaching under different constellations. The cursory self-reflections presented here on the seminar “Interreligious learning. Essentials of Christian–Islamic Dialogue”, which has been held regularly at JLU, Giessen for several years, are aimed at taking into account the specific institutional context of this course and, as already mentioned, have the intention of stimulating exchange on interreligious learning across locations.

alogue, knowledge building in the Christian and Islamic religions), the “sources of learning” in the seminar and the impact of the seminar beyond the end of the course.³⁷ Against the background of what has been outlined so far, in terms of evaluation it is interesting to examine to what extent the students’ responses reflect or do not reflect the didactic considerations on the seminar’s design.

Analyses

Fifteen students took part in the small-scale survey,³⁸ all of whom were female. The age structure, the semesters previously attended by the participants and the chosen subjects were as follows:

Table 1: Age structure

Age (in years)	Number of students
21	2
22	8
25	2
27	2
Not specified	1

Average age: 22.9 years

³⁷ In this respect, there are similarities with regard to the three educational components (competence building, knowledge development, attitude change), which C. P. Sajak mentions in his highly nuanced discussion and evaluation of various models of and settings for interreligious learning (in the five dimensions: didactic model, organisation, content, methods, evaluation/assessment perspective): “Religious education arises through the interplay of competence development, knowledge building and attitude change.” (Sajak 2018, 93; for context: *ibid.*, 82–117). In the survey within our seminar, competence development refers, for example, to the development of dialogue skills, to the acquisition of knowledge of factual and reflective knowledge regarding Christian and Islamic beliefs and to changes in attitudes, i.e. to the effects of the course in question on the (inter-religiously relevant) attitudes of the participants beyond the end of the seminar.

³⁸ According to the student administration body, a total of 27 students participated in the seminar, including one male and 26 females; one student of ethics in the secondary school teaching programme; 18 students of Islamic religion/theology; eight students of Catholic religion/theology.

Table 2: Number of semesters

Semester	Number of students
4th semester	6
6th semester	7
Not specified	2

Table 3: Subject combinations

Selected subjects	Number of students
Primary school teaching degree (L1) with the subjects German, maths and Islamic religion	10
Secondary school teaching degree (L2) with the subjects German and Catholic religion	2
Secondary school teaching degree (L2) with the subjects English and Catholic religion	1
BA in education outside the formal education system with Catholic theology	1
Not specified	1

The sociometric distributions are mainly derived from the degree programmes offered and the studying regulations. They are younger students (on average around 23 years old) in the middle semesters (4–6), with ten students of Islamic religion (71%) compared to four students studying Catholic religion or Catholic theology (29%). The fact that the students of Islamic theology only study to become primary school teachers (L1) is due to the range of courses offered at JLU, Giessen, which is also intended by federal state policy and where Islamic religion is only offered for this teacher training programme. In the module regulations for Catholic religion, on the other hand, this seminar is can be taken as part of teaching degree programmes for secondary schools as well as BA degree programmes.

In the open question about the participants' motivation for attending the seminar (multiple answers possible), more than 20 responses were cited. Organisational reasons for choosing the course were cited (the time available and the studying regulations were

both mentioned once). The context was mentioned twice insofar as recommendations from other students were cited as a motivation. However, most of the mentions were related to the interest and relevance of the subject matter, which was seen both in the private environment and in the later field of work at school. At the same time, key areas of interest were mentioned, such as interreligious exchange, dialogue or the intention to learn new things about each other. Strikingly, social context (such as a pluralistic society or political conflicts with religious underpinning) or the intention to get a deeper understanding of one's own religion played no role in this question.

In the questionnaire, the content(-related) aspects that the students remembered from the seminar were divided into four areas: 1. dialogue, 2. knowledge of Christianity, 3. knowledge of Islam and 4. religious practice (i.e. both the acquisition of skills in dialogue and the acquisition of theological knowledge of religion). In the dialogue section, 15 responses were made in open questions with the possibility of multiple answers. Frequent reference was made here to similarities and differences and to comparisons; at the same time, attitudes (apparently learnt or deepened in the seminar) were mentioned: appreciation, understanding, openness and respect. In one mention, the social framework was also emphasised: peaceful coexistence. Overall, therefore, the students' self-perception of their knowledge and attitude competencies are mixed. There were 15 mentions of Christianity, with the topic of "Trinity" dominating with five mentions (i.e. 1/3; 33%). Interestingly, only one mention was made by students of Christian religion/theology with regard to this item; apparently this group was more interested in learning outcomes in the area of dialogue or Islam. The survey on the content of Islamic religion produced 18 responses. Here, both students of Christian religion/theology and Islamic religion provided information. There are answers both at the meta level, e.g. on prior knowledge, dealing with prejudices, new insights, information, similarities and on specific topics of Islamic religion. The mentions of content-related topics reflect quite clearly the topics that were discussed in the seminar sessions, the literature used there and the presentations: Qur'an, Bible, understanding of God, Muhammad, Jesus and mosques. The rather abstract and reflexive concept of revelation (the explicit subject of one seminar session) is not mentioned.

There are 15 mentions of the topic of practice, of which six (more than one third; 40 %) explicitly refer to the excursions and seven (almost half, 46 %) to the discussion of textbooks. Interestingly, the visit of a school class (12th grade, secondary school (Gymnasium) accompanied by their teacher in the field of Catholic religion) is not mentioned at all. Social context is referred to twice in this regard. The place of religion in society and the emerging decline in Christian religious practice are each cited once as a gain in knowledge.

The question on “learning sources” was asked as a closed question with a scale of five to one (important to unimportant), so that average values (according to the scale between one and five) could be determined. The following learning sources received high approval (> 4) with the following average values: small group discussion with 4.5; excursions with 4.5; lecturers with 4.3; and representatives of religious communities with 4.2. Lower approval (< 4) was given to requests to speak with students of another subject with 3.9; plenary discussions with 3.9; guests (Catholic religion / religious education class and teacher) with 3.5; self-study (primarily via provided or partially pre-researched [bibliography] literature) with 3.5; and requests to speak with students from the same subject with 3.5. This value is therefore below the value of 3.9 for requests to speak with students of another subject. With this item, it is noticeable that discursive learning methods with a high proportion of discussion (especially small group discussions) and the illustrative, experience-orientated methods of excursions to sacred spaces are highly valued with the highest approval rating of 4.5; in contrast, the approval rating for plenary discussions is somewhat lower at 3.9. Self-study, together with other options, received the lowest approval rating at 3.5. Overall, however, none of the learning sources mentioned were ranked below the middle value on the scale: 3.0. In addition to the positively rated discursiveness, the “crossing of perspectives”, which is considered to be conducive to learning, is also striking, insofar as learning from the statements of students from another subject (value: 3.9) ranks noticeably higher than learning from students from the same subject (value 3.5).

The last part of the questionnaire was dedicated to the impact of the seminar, i.e. its continued effect on the students after the end of the course. Of the 15 respondents, twelve (i.e. 80 %) stated that they wanted to continue working on interreligious dialogue (two

answered no to this question and one did not specify an answer). Three forums were named: school, i.e. the respondents' primary future professional field, the private sphere and the area of attitudes, in the sense of increased awareness of religious diversity, seeking contact with people of other religions and overcoming restraint.³⁹ Finally, evaluation questions were asked. In terms of what the students liked, two areas in particular were addressed: the discursiveness (exchange, dialogue with multiple responses, and also texts and presentations on one occasion) and the open, self-confident and discussion-friendly atmosphere (friendliness of the lecturers, respect, atmosphere, being able to express one's own opinion, ...). This item, as with the responses on the acquisition of skills and knowledge, also confirms the importance of discursiveness and open exchange, especially within a seminar that is explicitly dedicated to reflection and the method and content of interreligious dialogue. When the participants were asked what they did not like, there were two main areas of responses: firstly, from an organisational point of view, the lack of time, especially when carrying out the excursions (to churches and mosques), which had to be completed within 90 minutes for technical reasons; secondly, further discursive approaches were called for in addition to those already introduced. For example, there were two complaints about too much "frontal teaching", which presumably related to the 20-minute presentations, the only monologue elements of the sessions (albeit in mixed presentation groups). The deliberately open-ended final question about personal comments and remarks emphasised the points already mentioned, particularly the positive assessment of the discussion and excursion formats and the stimulating atmosphere for exchange. One explicit reference was made to the framework of university cooperation between the Giessen theologues ("cooperation between the theologues").

39 The three components of (interreligious) education, skills development, knowledge building and attitude change (especially the latter), are alluded to here as objectives to be pursued after the event.

Conclusions From the Feedback

Initial analyses of the small empirical survey on the seminar provide some insights into its relevance (1), the significance of its institutional framing (2) and university didactic observations (3):

- (1) The relevance of the seminar is seen both in its significance for the participants' own lives and for the professional field of school teaching. Both are important for the participants. As shown, the social framework is also mentioned on one occasion or another, but less prominently than the private environment and school. In this respect, the ability to deal with plurality and interreligious competence are just as personally and professionally relevant for the students surveyed; they obviously determine—in their own perception—the living environment of the interviewees as well as Christian and Islamic religious education in the present and future. The strong orientation of the underlying institutional cooperation of Giessen theology on social issues is not evident in this explicit way among the students. Since religious diversity is relevant to the students' lifeworlds and their prospective professional field as teachers, it implicitly plays a major role.
- (2) The institutional framework of the seminar is definitely mentioned at times, e.g. when reference is made to social contexts, studying regulations or recommendations for other students to attend the seminar (which is only possible through the institutionalised/continuous offering of such a course). However, general interest in the topic is predominant. In this respect, the Focus Area "Theology/ies, Diversity, Society" at JLU, Giessen does not so much induce a preoccupation with religious diversity in the social environment and in theological reflections; as an institution, it rather reflects/mirrors this fact, takes it up and deepens/consolidates it.
- (3) In terms of higher education didactics, the pervasive positive evaluations and demands for discursive and experiential educational elements (small group discussions, excursions) are striking, behind which the elements of knowledge building (texts, self-study, presentations) lag behind in popularity among students. A central didactic challenge in the interreligious seminar

is to achieve a good balance between the development of content-related knowledge and the acquisition of methodological skills, so that not only can methods of learning be acquired, but so can necessary knowledge and skills of (self-)reflection. Altogether, these competences are essential for a thorough interfaith dialogue. Practical applicability (for example with the popular topic of “textbooks”), professional relevance and an interest in the topic based on one’s own living environment are the driving forces behind interreligious learning in the context of the seminar. They need to be taken up and linked with less explicit but important learning objectives (e.g. the importance of theological reflective knowledge and the social relevance of the topic).

Conclusion

For more than ten years, the seminars on interreligious learning and dialogue at JLU, Giessen have not only contributed to increasing interest in questions of interreligiosity but have also facilitated valuable encounters and a mutual understanding between students. At the same time, the seminars are a testimony to the constructive cooperation between Giessen’s theologies at the institutional university level. We consider this form of academic interreligiousness in the areas of teaching, research and the third mission to be an important driver in contributing to a positive culture of pluralism in a multi-religious and multicultural society.

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