SHIFTING BORDERS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TOWARDS GREATER FRAMES OF SOLIDARITY

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INTRODUCTION

There is hardly any country on the map of the world the population of which is homogeneous. Latvia is not an exception. Latvia is ethnically diverse society; therefore, this is essential to develop students' tolerance towards diverse cultures and religions. According to the survey carried out among the population of Latvia, the greatest distance of people living in Latvia is towards Roma people, Kurds, and people of color. People do not prefer contacting with them as permanent residents. Latvia has ratified international agreements against all forms of intolerance, xenophobia, Semitism and racism and elaborated an action plan to deal with all forms of discrimination, but still much has to be done to implement the ideals of sustainable practice in life. There exists a prevailing sentiment that religious diversity causes tension or conflict within a family, within a society, or among nations. In Latvia diverse religions and ethnicities coexisted peacefully throughout the history; they have expressed a strong bond of solidarity with each other and practiced charity. Today, when the discussions about the interreligious dialogue become more pronounced, one can evidence the exclusivist attitude and worries that can threaten one's religious identity. Today Latvia can be described as Christian and mostly secular country where many people hold a mixture of traditional religious beliefs without necessarily belonging to a Church, other people practice belonging without conforming to a certain church. Traditional religions are being expanded by the multiple activities of individuals and church communities, including new spiritualities. The majority of individuals choose to belong to a diversity of religious denominations, constituting a range of value-systems, thereby promoting social solidarity.

While joining EU, a number of challenges were made in transcending borders: territorial (free exchange of people), cultural (attempts to define 'European identity'); religious (building interreligious dialogue); linguistic (study of languages), economic (transnational organizations), ideological (acceptance of a plurality of religious and non-religious views), and psychological (overcoming biases and exclusivist attitudes).

People in Latvia are willing to donate money to those who are in need and who suffer for different reasons. The hearts of people are open when asked to extend solidarity to people from other nations who suffer from natural disasters or wars. Latvia is a part of EU, and, like other European countries, citizens of Latvia express solidarity with Europeans, rather than demonstrate exclusivists attitudes.

To meet the challenges of the day, RE in Latvia should be viewed from a sustainability perspective as a dialogical one, by involving political, social, cultural and ecological perspective, thus aiming at the participation of students responsibly and intelligently in political, cultural and societal processes. Sustainability perspective assumes that religious education will not offer a monolithic understanding of the world but rather will open a space for a plurality of understandings and perspectives where students will be engaged in challenging existing power structures to interpret events from the perspective of marginalized and will challenge dominant metanarratives of patriarchal construction of reality. In line with Giroux, knowledge-driven from the margins can offer complex and multiple realities. Sustainability pedagogy will allow not only identifying with the marginalized ones but also will give them a voice in shaping educational discourse. By learning to understand the marginalized groups from their perspective, the learners will be able to develop a sense of solidarity with those groups.

RE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF LATVIA REVISITED

Latvia public schools are intended to be for the students of all worldviews, both religious and non-religious. In Latvia since 1996 Latvia's Parliament issued *the Amendment to the Law on Religious Organizations*[1],

[1] *The Law on Religious Organizations*. Saeima (1996). www.likumi.lv, accessed 10.09.2014.

suggest the use of a confessional approach for teaching religion in public schools. There is no state religion, but the law gives eight religious groups: Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventhday Adventists, and Jews, rights and privileges to teach religious education (*International Religious Freedom Report*[2]. Gradually, schools find it very difficult to introduce the confessional approach to teaching RE since the environment in schools in not homogeneous any more, except for some religiously homogenous regions in Latgale. Still, some teachers insist that children at the primary school haven't developed their religious identity; therefore, teaching within one faith framework is better than offering them a wide range of alternatives. The other line of argumentation stresses that teaching religion within the framework of one religion presents quite an exclusive practice. Today schools have a choice between a nonconfessional 'Christian faith' course if at least ten parents choose the course and the 'Ethics' as an alternative. Due to the debates about the most appropriate ways of teaching religion, the course 'Christian Faith', was designed for grades 1-4, focusing on the basics of Christian faith from the nonconfessional and biblical perspective. Still, according to the survey, most of the families choose 'Ethics' as a subject to be taught to their children rather that 'Christian faith'.

The current practice of use of confessional approaches towards teaching religion presents quite an exclusivist approach. Nonconfessional approaches respond much better to a diversity one encounters in a contemporary school and the society. Still, nonconfessional approaches in Latvia center around teaching Christian religions, leaving behind quite a large number of diverse worldviews and belief systems.

Content-based pedagogy with add-on approaches does not help much in learning how to live with the diversity and how to practice solidarity. Traditional pedagogical models based on knowledge acquisition or knowledge transfer approaches proved to be less efficient. Emerging diversity challenges to think not only about the content one teaches but also the ways one teaches.

Sustainable pedagogical approaches are more useful since they are

[2] **Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor**, *International Religious Freedom Report US* (2012) http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012religiousfreedom/#wrapper, accessed 15.09.2014.

informed by the sociopolitical, symbolic, time and personal contexts and are conscious how knowledge is created, what counts as valid knowledge. Valuing students' lived experiences and situated knowledge on the content opens rich opportunities for the dialogic engagement with participants' perspectives. This will help to expand students' frames of reference with alternative notions. As Kumagai and Lypson[3] suggest, this will help to reflect critically on one's bias and assumptions. Therefore, classroom needs to become a safe place where the student can express one's deeply held beliefs and ideas.

There are numerous approaches that exist towards teaching religious education issues and life's philosophical questions by integrating those issues in other subjects of the curriculum or by offering worldviews education that is a much broader concept than religious education. A worldview education could offer a more holistic and more inclusive perspective of teaching about religious and non-religious views, thus, developing students' competency 'to live together' and experience of solidarity. The aim of a worldview education is to reach 'worldview literacy'. Schlitz, Vieten, Miller, Peterson and Freeman[4] assert that it is one's ability to acquire skills and capabilities needed to understand one's worldviews, and to become more aware of the worldviews of others, without any pressure of adopting their worldview as our own. Worldview education aims at developing awareness and deeper understanding of one's own worldview and the ability to deal with conflicting views, developing empathy and compassion towards diverse religious and non-religious worldviews. By learning the stories and experiences of others, students learn that others' life experiences have a meaning and value.

Banks[5] suggest numerous approaches, such as contributory, additive, transformative, and social action approach towards teaching religious and multicultural issues, where the social action model proved to be more

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[3] Arno **Kumagai** and Monica **Lypson,** "Beyond Cultural Competence: Critical Consciousness, Social Justice, and Multicultural Education" – *Academic Medicine*, 84 (2009), 82-87.

[4] Marilyn **Schlitz**, Cassandra **Vieten** and Elizabeth **Miller,** "Worldview Transformation and the Development of Social Consciousness" – *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 17/7,8 (2010), 18-36.

[5] James A. **Banks** and Cherry A. McGee **Banks** *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Needham Heights: Wiley, 2009).

efficient in tackling intercultural issues, responding to the diversity and offering a transformative agenda. Zembylas and Iasonos[6] suggest that transformative approach mobilizes teachers for transforming their pedagogical approaches and pedagogy towards integrating values of social justice, equality and solidarity. Building a more inclusive religious education requires creating a comprehension across boundaries, thus finding alternative and more forward-looking conceptualizations. Building an intercultural dialogue across diverse cultural groups and backgrounds, or as Durant and Shepherd[7] assert, it causes diffusion, adaptation, and hybridization that becomes a typical feature of a communicative landscape that gradually causes *'adaptive convergence in communicative behavior'* leading to a deeper sense of solidarity across the differences.

EXPANDING BORDERS: BIBLICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SOLIDARITY

Solidarity is an ambiguous concept that was widely discussed by the theologians, social theorists, and philosophers. Solidarity as a concept does not appear directly in Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament, but is implicitly embedded in Christian praxis. Copelan[8] and other feminist thinkers provide fresh and innovative insights of interpreting solidarity by emphasizing it as an integral part of theology.

The notion of solidarity has different meanings. Solidarity is identified in *the Millennium Declaration* as one of the central values of the XXI century. As the Pope Francis[9] reminds is: "many situations of inequality,

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[6] Michalinos **Zembylas** and Sotiroula **Iasonos**, "Leadership Styles and Multicultural Education Approaches: An Exploration of Their Relationships" – *Journal of Leadership in Education*, 13/2 (2010), 163-183.

[7] Alan **Durant** and Ifan **Shepherd,** "'Culture' and 'Communication' in Intercultural Communication" – *European Journal of English Studies*, 13/2 (2009), 160.

[8] Shawn M. **Copeland**, "Towards a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity" – *Women and Theology*. Eds. Mary Ann Hindsdale & Phillis Kaminski (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 261.

[9] Pope **Francis,** "Fraternity, the foundation and Pathway to peace. Peace Message of Pope Francis for the celebration of the world day of peace" – *Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) Newsletter*, January 1 (2014).

poverty and injustice are signs of the absence of a culture of solidarity. Dominant ideologies, characterized by individualism and materialistic consumerism, fuel 'throw away' mentality that leads to the abandonment of those considered 'useless'".

Solidarity has its individual, social, structural, and national aspects. The *individual aspect* of solidarity signifies the help people are willing to provide to others. The *social* aspect of solidarity refers to the interaction of many people. The *national aspect* of solidarity signifies that the states of economic prosperity help others.

There is a distinction that exists between one and twosided solidarity. Onesided solidarity has a meaning of assisting one group in the society by the other group. Twosided solidarity indicates to a reciprocal relationship that exists between individuals or groups, and there is no clear distinction between givers and receivers ranging from the local to the global level.

Hoedemaekers, Gordijn, and Pijnenburg[10] relate solidarity to altruism and a concern about other people who suffer from injustice and one's willingness to commit one to help those people. They argue that it is often based on feelings of empathy and a voluntary act.

Stjorno[11] traces the trajectory of solidarity back to works of Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Habermas. Hollenbach[12] highlights a political dimension of solidarity, by placing an emphases on social and structural change, thus promoting the rights of all the oppressed. Gadamer[13] also moves away from the ontological to political dimensions of solidarity as well.

Solidarity implies the notions of community, difference and reciprocal understanding. Gadamer emphasizes three aspects of solidarity: first, it includes understanding shared circumstances, secondly, a respect to difference among peoples, and a coexistence of different ethnic, and religious identities; thirdly, it includes an understanding of distinctiveness.

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[10] Roger **Hoedemaekers**, Bert **Gordijn** and Martien **Pijnenburg**, "Solidarity and Justice as Guiding Principles in Genomic Research" – *Bioethics*, 21/6 (2007), 342-350.

[11] Steinar **Stjorno**, *Solidarity in Europe: The history of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[12] David **Hollenbach**, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[13] Hans Georg **Gadamer**, "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, Subject and Person" – *Continental Philosophy Review*, 33 (2000), 275-287.

Because of those differences, peoples and nations can help providing a different perspective to an issue, thus revealing new aspects about themselves. Deeper understanding of otherness can lead towards reciprocal selfunderstanding. He suggests to engage in hermeneutics work of exploring the polarity of being at the same time familiar with the others and experiencing strangeness… being historically distant and at the same time belonging to the tradition Gadamer.[14] Still, belonging to a certain tradition involves a reflection and a dialogue with a tradition. By engaging in a critical reflection, we reveal previous misperceptions, we develop much wider and a more expanded view. This way one develops in a more expanded view. Warnke[15] stresses that "we zoom out from the temporal horizon" into a more comprehensive view. Our finitude indicates that our understanding of a tradition and ourselves will always be incomplete; "the future will always have the potential for change".[16] Our understanding is bound to the past, and we are tradition-bound infinite beings, therefore, our explanations can only be tentative. He encourages to engage in a dialogue with the otherness in 'self' and 'in the others', that will lead towards a more genuine I-Thou relationships and wider solidarity. He emphasizes the role of organizations in disclosing the solidarity that already resides among people.

In line with the feminist thinkers, Copeland[17] emphasizes building solidarity with the marginalized and the poor, thus fostering a structural change since the oppressed have their perspectives, hopes, aspirations and spiritualities to share with the others. As Korgen[18] argues solidarity is a realistic ideal and points to numerous examples of people living out of the ethic solidarity even if no being noticed.

According to the Catholic Social Teaching, solidarity underscores sharing a responsibility to assist excluded and marginalized people. As

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Georgia **Warnke**, "Solidarity and Tradition in Gadamer's Hermeneutics" – *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), 15.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Shawn M. **Copeland**, "Towards a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity" – *Women and Theology*. Eds. Mary Ann Hindsdale and Phillis Kaminski (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 261.

[18] Jeffry Odell **Korgen**, *Solidarity will transform the World: Stories of Hope from Catholic Relief Services* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

Cardinal Rodrigues[19] argues, the act of solidarity implies sharing, and sharing is not a utopian or spiritualistic action but rather should be seen as an essential element to ensure sustainable development, thus, enlarging people's commitment to unity and solidarity.

Sustainable frame of solidarity requires to go beyond short-term goals and to foster a long-term institutional change (Kaulemu[20], Scholz[21]). Sustainability perspective puts an ethical imperative for recovering human relations in all spheres of life – economic, cultural, political, and religious.

A contemporary research on solidarity rejects the understanding of solidarity built upon biological or social norms and sets the foundation of authentic solidarity in communication and openness. Jodi Deane explains solidarity from three different levels: affection, conventional, and reflexive. In the affection level, it is the result of friendship and love; in the conventional level, it is organized around common interests; and in the reflective level, it is rooted in dialogue, argument, and debate[22] in her book *Solidarity of Strangers*.

Solidarity helps one to see the other as an equal partner in God's creation and recognizes the *image Dei* in all people (Gen 1:27). Many Biblical passages and Gospel messages illustrate the meaning of solidarity about one's enemy (Lk 10:25-37). This is reflected in case of the Good Samaritan, about one's neighbors, and the poor. In the case of a Good Samaritan, solidarity bounds extend to external solidarity framework that expands the scope of solidarity as well as the scope of a neighbor. By identifying himself with the poor, the sick, and the alienated, Jesus has set high standards for everyone by proposing solidarity as a religious norm to his followers. He says: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35-36,40).

Particular emphases on solidarity as coresponsibility is reflected in

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[19] Oscar Andres Cardinal **Rodrigez**, *The Catholic Church and the Globalization of Solidarity* – Speech given at Vatican City, July 7, 2003, caritas.org.

[20] David **Kaulemu**, "Building Solidarity for Social Transformation through the Church's Social Teaching" – *Catholic Social Teaching in Global Perspective*. Eds. Daniel Mc Donald (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 36-80.

[21] Sally J. **Scholz**, *Political Solidarity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

[22] Jodi **Dean**, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 176.

the foot washing scene (Jn 13:1-20). Many liberation and political theologians put the emphases on solidarity with poor as a heart of Christian ethics. As Beyer emphasizes, "solidarity is rooted in anthropology of hope"[23] which enables people go beyond their self-interest and egoism leading towards universal solidarity. In the Catholic Church teachings there is a strong emphasis on solidarity as a high ideal.

Catholic Social teaching places emphases on solidarity as an ethical imperative, a virtue, or as a crises management strategy in restoring one's integrity, brokenness and well- being. Since no man and woman is an island, we need to strive for interdependence and a deeper solidarity.

CHALLENGES FOR RE IN BUILDING SOLIDARITY FRAMEWORK

Teaching solidarity in our turbulent times is one of the challenging tasks for the religious educator.

Nothing is more dangerous than the radicalized mind and indoctrinated child. The way to deal with is critical education and the school is the place where youth need to be introduced to the power of critical inquiry. A young person needs to learn how to make wise choices and tolerance towards the other. The student has to be exposed to different religious and non-religious views. This will serve as a starting point for developing solidarity afterward.

Sustainability can be achieved only when one learns to respect those with whom he/she disagrees and engages in the discussion of one' stereotypes and presuppositions. This requires building a strong tradition of religious reflection to produce independent and creative minds.

Today pupils are concerned mostly with their rights. Therefore, this is important to place greater emphases on how rights presuppose duties. There is a call for a more sustainable pedagogy that teaches youth how to undertake a responsibility for the needs of others, particularly of those who are in need and are marginalized.

Solidarity can be built in line with *Toledo guiding principles* that

[23] Gerald L. **Beyer**, "The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching" – *Political Theology*, 15/1 (2014), 7-25.

emphasize the need of sensitivity towards "different local manifestations of religious and secular plurality in schools and the communities" that will ensure "a fair and balanced coverage of different religions and philosophies;"[24] and that teaching about religions and beliefs should be "sensitive, balanced, inclusive, non-doctrinal, impartial, and based on human rights principles relating to freedom of religion and belief."[25] This can reinforce tolerance, respect and caring for others; that might potentially lead to solidarity.

Warnke argues that traditions have a great potential for expansion if engaged in a critical reflection and moving forwards 'our aspirations for the future'.[26] According to Gadamer, any organization can help to disclose solidarity of people *apriori* residing in them by finding means how to bind strangers together and to reveal them to one another in their particularity. [27]

Sustainable pedagogies envisage teaching about other religions with avoiding stereotyping and misrepresentation on other beliefs. This involves a dialogical approach where the students are exposed to a variety of views where they develop an interest about a deeper exploration of a diverse views and beliefs.

Students need to be taught how stereotyping can damage individuals. A commitment to freedom of religion or belief and sensitivity to the diverse religious faith expressions will foster mutual respect and understanding, leading to solidarity.

SUMMARY

There are diverse ways of interpreting and understanding solidarity, depending on the context and needs. Solidarity and justice as part of legal requirements alone will not guarantee its implementation in practice. It

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[24] **OSCE**, *The Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religion or belief* (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2007), 41. http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true, accessed 15.01.2015.

[25] *Ibid.*, 40.

[26] Georgia **Warnke**, "Solidarity and Tradition in Gadamer's Hermeneutics" – *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), 21.

[27] *Ibid.*, 20-21.

must become an everyday practice by recognition that each and every one is interrelated and is coresponsible for the wellbeing of all. The concept of justice is rooted in solidarity with all people, particularly the marginal and the excluded ones.

Promotion of culture of solidarity embedded in mutual understanding and equal participation of each and every member in building sustainable societies requires a long-term perspective and a strategy accepted by all members involved – politics, administration, families and the society.

This is clear that not a single subject can fully teach students how to interact efficiently with the individuals from different cultures and backgrounds. To gain necessary skills how to live in a heterogeneous environment students need ongoing opportunities to live in new and changing contexts. Heterogeneous environment in the classroom will not automatically teach a student to communicate across differences and expand their frames of solidarity.

Students' worldviews are not rigid entities, and presuppositions are also subjects of change with the growth of one's experience. The teacher must keep in mind the multidimensional cultural and religious world of the learner, and to apply this in a particular learning situation.

In line with the ideals expressed in EU document, *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue – Living together as equals in dignity*[28], understanding religions and non-religious convictions contributes to intercultural dialogue, and it is seen as "an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on mutual understanding and respect".

Life sets great questions that could be religious, philosophical or worldview questions, therefore, worldview education can serve as a better solution for a more holistic and more inclusive perspective of teaching about religious and non-religious views, thus, developing students' competency 'to live together' and to strengthen their bonds of solidarity.[29]

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[28] **Council of Europe**, *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue – Living together as equals in dignity* (EU: Strasbourg, 7 May 2008), 10-11. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_ en.pdf, accessed 10.09.2015.

[29] *Ibid.,* 10-11.