

Religious diversity as political, educational and theological condition. Orthodox Religious Education in Dialogue with Dietrich Benner's Allgemeine Pädagogik

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1. Abstract

In the present study, we will analyse the importance of dialogue with religious diversity as a component of both the public space and the pedagogical process that takes place within the framework of Religious Education (μήπως όλα τα Religious Education με κεφαλαία τα πρώτα γράμματα;). In this sense, this study moves rather in a theoretical dimension. The whole topic is treated on the basis of certain principles developed in the work of the German educator Dietrich Benner. In particular, it examines why Religious Education is integrated in the public education system of modern democratic societies. In addition, the concept of public space is analysed as a mode of existence constituted by the encounter of heterogeneities. A distinction is made between the two aspects of the religious phenomenon, i.e. between the mystagogical experience and the public function of religion. Furthermore, we try to relate the basic aim of Religious Education to the contemporary challenge for participation in the public function of religion. Finally, we approach the concept of religious diversity from the perspective of Orthodox theological thought and life; this choice is considered necessary because in Greece the relevant legal framework dictates that Religious Education sets the development of the religious consciousness of Orthodox Christian students as its fundamental goal. A question therefore arises as to whether and to what extent Religious Education based on Orthodox tradition and life, can take into account the phenomenon of religious diversity and, more generally, meet the requirements of public life in modern democratic societies.



2. Why Religious Education is necessary in the school of modern democratic societies

According to Dietrich Benner's pedagogical thinking, the teaching-learning process unfolds in the school as a remote observation of the real world and, thus, as a "virtual" approach of it (Benner 2015b). In school, pupils explore the world as an object in order to encounter it and, through this encounter, to follow the way leading to their life destination. According to Benner, school curriculum in modern democratic societies also includes religion; this option is justified, because Religion stands for a constituent element of the public sphere (Benner 2014c) and should therefore belong among the subjects provided by the school curriculum, as school prepares young people for their upcoming entry into the public sphere (Benner 2005). But why should this be necessary at a time when, as we know, many religious communities already show a practical interest and concern for the Religious Education of their young members? Are the religious communities unable to offer a suitable religious instruction to the younger generations by educational means, and do they, therefore, need the help of school education? Or do the religious communities, when providing Religious Education, sometimes convey contents and orientations that do not promote the harmonious functioning of the modern, non-hierarchical world as a field of public encounter and dialogue between different and diverse rationales. In Benner's thinking we find the following answer, which encompasses both of the above concerns: "The reasons why this is the case could be manifold and could lie in the fact that it is not possible to save and preserve a religion solely with the help of Religious Education provided by religious communities, or also in the fact that this educational task cannot lie in the hands of religious communities alone, because the development of religious fundamentalism must be avoided in order to promote the public function of religion" (Benner et al. 2007, 15). "Should religion still have a future, this is something that may depend first and foremost on whether and to what extent religion succeeds both in updating the critique it makes of the world in a non-fundamentalist sense and, furthermore, in relating to the critique that Education, Ethics and Politics make for religious communities and churches" (Benner 2014e).

The above argumentation clearly shows that Religious Education is an essential part of school curriculum, not only because religion is a functional component of the public sphere, but also because





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the future of religion as a component of the public sphere is being questioned and is at stake. This implicates, following the rationale of Benner, that religious communities are sometimes unable nowadays to effectively fulfil the educational task of religious instruction regarding their young members, and that this weakness emerges due to the fact that they do not interact successfully with all challenges developed in the modern world.

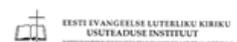
3. Religion as a structural element of the modern public space.

Dialogue in democratic societies, Benner argues, can only be effective, if the conditions on which public space is built, are fulfilled. The profound prerequisite for the constitution of public space, according to the German educator, is the acceptance of the principle called as “the non-hierarchical order of the totality of human action” (Benner 2015a); according to this, the whole society is structured by differentiated spheres of action, each of which has its own logic, but also its own space, for which ~~its~~ each one is responsible and accountable. Nevertheless, they all form together the whole of human action, and, at the same time, separate from each other in order to promote the common progress of humanity. This means that each sphere of action approaches the real world not only from its own point of view but also taking into account approaches and views offered by the other one. When one of them claims to be hegemonic over all others and imposes its own particular rationale as the sole criterion for evaluating all the aspects of the world, an attitude of an absolute fundamentalism is manifested, which violates the principle of the non-hierarchical order.

The question that arises here is whether and how religious communities can enter into dialogue with the modern world, taking into account the public discourse rules based on the principle of the non-hierarchical order. Benner takes up this question after elaborating the specificity (proprium) of religion (Benner 2014e, 19). Benner's reflection in this regard is strongly influenced by the German theologian, philosopher and educator Friedrich Schleiermacher; he argues that religious experience is enclosed in the sense of the absolute dependency (schlechthinnige Abhängigkeit) (Benner 2014a, 82) from an infinite being (the Absolute) that all human beings experience. This



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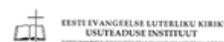


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infinite being (i.e. the Absolute) transcends, “encompasses” and gives meaning to everything that is seen as finite and not absolute. This experience is not an expression of an emotional or a “romantic” state, but represents a kind of self-consciousness, experience and knowledge at the same time: It is man's awareness that every inch of this world is absolutely dependent on a supreme, eternal and infinite power that gives meaning to all the finite and impermanent things, leading them towards a universality and a unity with each other (cf. Stogiannidis 2013). In Benner’s thought this “sense” (Gefühl) shapes the most characteristic feature of religion as a constitutive parameter of life universality. This reflection, concerning the idea of the finitude of human nature (i.e. the fact that human beings as biological beings have an end), is a basic element that structures the particular intrinsic rationale of religious action in social becoming (Benner 2014e, 19). As Benner argues, the experience and understanding of finitude of the human nature is rendered in different terms in each case, such as “creatureliness”, “mortality”, the certainty of death, or even the relationship of the living people to those ones that passed away (Benner 2014e, 19).

4. The public function of religion

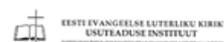
Following all the aforementioned observations, Religion is considered to be a way of life and a way of approaching and perceiving reality based on the awareness that man is a finite being. Here, however, Benner moves to a distinction that, although not explicitly stated, is evident in his work. This distinction recognises two dimensions of religion, which do not point to any kind of "dissection" of religion; on the contrary, it illustrates two different aspects through which we can approach Religion: One has to do with the content of religious experience per se, whilst the other refers to the public function of religion in society. Both dimensions relate to the religious phenomenon itself, and both are inseparable; however, in the first case, there is an attempt to gain insight into the interior reality, where the religious experience appears as something mystagogical that can only be tasted by the “insiders”. In the second case, the impression we extract comes from Religion external aspect, which manifests itself within the world (i.e. as something immanent) and emerges as a phenomenon

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shaped by the relationship between it and the other spheres of human action within the whole of the society. For the inner aspect of religion, Benner uses the terms “Arcanum des Religiösen” (= arcanum of Religion) (Benner 2014d, 126) and “Geheimnis des Glaubens” (= “mystery of the faith”) (Benner 2014d, 125). For the external aspect of religion, the German educator again refers to Schleiermacher, whom he interprets, on the one hand using the philosophical terminology of another influential philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and on the other hand using hermeneutic approaches coming from the work of Hannah Arendt, another important figure in the field of philosophy. In this context in particular, - where Benner attempts to bring together and to combine harmoniously the philosophical conceptions of Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Arendt - Religion is conceived as an essential parameter for human life, i.e. as an indispensable factor strongly related to what we might call *conditio humana* (Benner 2014c; Arendt 2008).

In this sense, religion appears as a specific form of human being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) (Benner 2014c, 46), i.e. as a sector of human action (not the only one, but one specific among other different ones) in which human existence manifests itself as a fact, in which man interrelates themselves with other human beings around and with the world as well. The term “being-in-the-world” intends to express implicitly but clearly that the unique possibility of the human being, through which their existence comes into being, is to exist *in the world*, i.e. to develop themselves as a unique subject in the world in relation to other also unique subjects. The term “being-in-the-world” is particularly familiar in Heidegger's philosophical reflection (Makris 2019) and effortlessly recalls the term “Dasein” (Makris 2014, 308) as approached hermeneutically in his well-known work “*Sein und Zeit*” (cf. Heidegger 2006). At the same time, the notion of “*conditio humana*” forms a core topic revealing Arendt's philosophical thought: the contemporary Polis, which is composed as a public space of a plurality of disparate elements, is the outstanding and unique ontological possibility of human existence.

The above conceptual explanation has been made so that we understand what Benner is trying to tell us when he argues that Religious Education must be part of the school curriculum. In his view, Religious Education in schools should teach the new generations what cannot be successfully taught



in the societies of the modern world by the religious communities through a cross-generational coexistence. Thus, it is argued here that religious communities today sometimes show a certain inability to fulfil efficiently this religious educational task, which consists of providing the new generations with a deeper understanding of the public function of religion. Due to this weakness, there is a gap that school education should fill through Religious Education.

5. Participation in the public function of religion. What is this supposed to be?

What exactly does this participation in the public function of religion mean? In order to explore this issue, we should bear in mind that the German educator uses the term “*räsonierende Öffentlichkeit*” (= public sphere in which citizens debate with arguments) to illustrate the following: The successful and effective functioning of the public sphere is based on the citizens’ competence to lead a discourse using arguments (Benner & Brüggem 2000, 244).

This notion might be influenced by the work of Jürgen Habermas, especially the way this German philosopher approaches the concept of the public sphere (Grümme 2018, 47-74). Benner is quite clear on this point, as he speaks of a field in which heterogeneities encounter each other; and this encounter field is only communicated when its members know how to argue with discursively grounded arguments. This approach is undoubtedly related to what Benner calls “*Proprium des Religiösen*” (the key feature of religious action) and “*Öffentliche Funktion der Religion*” (“public function of religion”). It is implicated and deduced that the *key feature of this function* is the way in which the proprium of religious action is communicated in the public sphere, i.e., the awareness that human beings are dependent on a transcendent reality that “embraces” them as a Universality (Benner 2014b). Accordingly, man is only aware of his own existence, when he perceives himself as a being dependent on the Absolute and at the same time on the world around him. Conceived in this way, religion proves to be a constitutive element of the public sphere. How could this statement be justified? In order to provide a short explication, we should take into account that the public sphere can only function as a mode of existence only when people as citizens become aware of their existence



as being dependent on one another. In other words, it will be possible to consider religion as representing this everyday experience, through which man perceives that his existence and even his pursuit for his existential destination are conditioned by his fellow men i.e., the otherness of the other. What is meant by this? Would it be possible that in this context religious experience is somehow equated with everyday experience?

On the above point, we might note the following: Man's participation in religious life naturally means that man has a religious experience. This (religious) experience, basically also found in other situations, also forms an awareness that human existence is dependent on God. In that sense, man experiences the fact that his existence is conditioned by a transcendence. In everyday experience, something quasi-similar happens: man is supposed to live together with his fellow man in a society. But this presupposes that man sometimes renounces his own expectations or demands so that the expectations or demands of the other can be truly realized. Only in this path, is coexistence of people in a society conceivable and possible. Through this, every human being experiences that his or her existence is dependent on his or her fellow human being. The awareness of such dependence shows that in everyday life the human person is transcended, so to speak, in order the Other can be developed as a unique subject. The idea of transcendence is, thus, found and profound in religious life as well as in everyday life.

Thus, teaching Religious Education is something more than teaching doctrines of a specific religious tradition (cf. Biesta and Hannam 2019, 181f). In this respect, it is obvious, that the basic aim of Religious Education should be following: Preparing tomorrow's citizens to participate in the public function of religion as an event of encounter and communication within the boundaries of the modern "Polis". In a joint publication with other researchers, Benner makes the following insightful comments: "By using the term 'competence to participate in the religious sphere' we mean a competence that relates to both the religious tradition and other religious traditions as well as to the public sphere; this ability enables students to develop their views on a personal, collective and public level in relation to religious issues or phenomena. This orientation of enabling participation in the field of religious action must not be misinterpreted and lead to the erroneous conclusion that the main



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task of Religious Education is to convert young people and gain their confidence for a particular denomination” (Benner et al. 2007, 143-144).

6. Participating in the public function of religion as a basic aim of Religious Education

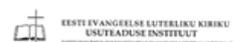
The above considerations are more than clear by establishing, as a basic aim of Religious Education, the development of pupils' competence to form a reasoned view on questions of religious interest (and in particular regarding the awareness of man's dependence on a universality which transcends him). This kind of a reasoned view, which pupils can support with arguments, is based on an understanding of both the religious tradition which they are familiar to with and the religious tradition of the others, i.e., the other religious traditions within the social framework of current religious plurality. Formulating an argument on religious issues and in particular on the predominant feature of religious action (i.e., the awareness of man's dependence on the Absolute) is something that pupils should undertake not only for their personal spiritual cultivation, but it is at the same time an action through which they can participate in the public space. This position is of significant importance because it gives Religious Education a theological and existential character.

Following this sequence of ideas, we believe that preparation for participation in the public function of religion relates to seven fundamental competences that should be considered in Religious Education:

- a. The competence to shape a personal and reasoned view regarding the fundamental feature of religion (i.e., the recognition that man is a finite being and that as an existence he is dependent on a transcendent/non-finite reality) as a structural component that helps the public sphere to function effectively.
- b. The competence to formulate an opinion on issues relating to the field of religion in general (and relating to either familiar or different religious traditions).
- c. The competence to understand the familiar religious tradition.
- d. The competence to understand different religious traditions.



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- e. The competence to understand people's (different) views on religious issues in general.
- f. The competence to enter into a dialogue with religious diversity in the public sphere.
- g. The competence to communicate, represent and support in public discourse one's own point of view concerning religion.

7. Dialogue with diversity as a condition for orthodox spiritual life

All the above-mentioned observations converge on the idea that dialogue with diversity is not just a challenge or requirement of our time, but a condition, without which the educational process that takes place in schools, as well as the function of the public sphere nowadays, is unthinkable and unattainable. We can, however, extend our thinking a little further by trying to explore whether the dialogue on religious diversity is somehow related to the life of the Church. In that respect, we can make some observations *based on an orthodox-theological reflection*.

The Church constitutes a “political” way of life, i.e., a way of manifesting the human political existence, since, as the etymology of the word itself indicates (ecclesia > = εκ + καλώ), it is an assembly and gathering, thus, modus of encounter and coexistence of people. This cohabitation does not build a superficial or incidental relationship between the members participating in it, but a union of life, communion and mutual participation, on the basis of which each member lives and embraces the lives of all others (cf. Mantzaridis 2015, 62). This, at least, is what Apostle Paul dictates when he describes the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12, 12; 1 Cor 12, 14-27). This charismatic unity is revealed in the Holy Eucharist, the centre of the Church life. John Damascene emphasizes that through participation in the Holy Eucharist all believers are united not only to Christ but also to one another, because they receive from the same body and blood (i.e., from the body and blood of Christ) (cf. Matsoukas 1992, 374). It could be argued on the basis of the above that the ecclesiastical way of life can be described as a “political” way of life, since man is called to be fulfilled as a person, meeting the other in Christ, and participating with him in a reality that takes the form of a “Polis” or “Body”. Thus, the encounter with the other within the Church is a movement of “Exodus” from individuality

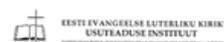


and egocentrism. In this context, one realizes that in Christianity the relationship between God and man is not a matter of individual piety or individual action, but a way of life, which is developed by participation and engagement within a collectivity characterized as “Church” and “Body of Christ”.

This relationship shaped between God and each human being is revealed and manifested as the relationship between God and the whole humanity (i.e. it has the form of a collectivity) within the life of Church. By extension, Christian life is unthinkable if we ignore the “political” nature of the Church. The meaning of life as well as the spiritual progress of man within the ecclesiastical “Polis” is a matter of a dynamic and constantly evolving collective partnership between God and human beings, a continuous becoming of a “mutual creation of meaning”, i.e. an “inter-meaningfulness” (Loudovikos 2015), by which God and human beings co-operate and work together. (Loudovikos 2019).

7.2 Ecclesia as a sustained dialogue with diversity

The Church lives as a “Polis” while at the same time having a “political” mission of universal dimensions. Practically, this is implemented as a continuous summons addressing the whole humanity for participation in a universal unity of the whole creation, which is realized through the sanctifying presence of the Holy Trinity (Matsoukas 1980, 223). It is, therefore, a life of an ecumenical unity with God. This shows that the Church exists for the sake of the world. Its purpose, in essence, is to constantly address the whole world and invite it to be transformed into such a “Polis”, in which the otherness, uniqueness and freedom of man as an entity that cooperates with others (who are counted not as strangers but as brothers and sisters) is highlighted and promoted thanks to the selfless, “sacrificial” and sanctifying love of the Holy Trinity. This does not imply, of course, that the Church wishes to impose itself on the world, nor does it imply that it sets out to endow political power with divine qualities. The “political” existence of the Church is a way of being, not a form of power or imposition. Its mission is to encounter the world, to be in dialogue with it and invite it to participate in its life; for this reason, its collective identity is constantly *en route* (Nissiotis 1965, 29; cf. Tsompanidis 2014, 596). Herein is applied the following rationale: The more it “opens up” and





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embraces the world, the more its work is fulfilled, and the more its identity is revealed (Papathanasiou 2009). Or – using an alternative formulation – the process of building itself, i.e., the process of completing its work and mission, passes by the charismatic presence of Holy Trinity through the encounter with the other and is directed towards the eschatological kingdom of God. Should this encounter, this relationship with the other, and, ultimately, the dialogue with otherness be missing, the formation of its identity is not possible. Of course, this dialogue, is a signifier of its identity, and, thus, it does not constitute a superficial relationship, but a deep grounded relationship of life that is realized in the perspective of a partnership between God and human beings. It is deduced from this observation that the Church as a “Polis”, and therefore the members who make up the Church, are in a constant state of movement and creation.

All the aforementioned findings make clear that the identity of the Church as a “Polis” and the identity of the human subject is an “open” affair and a continuous becoming (γίγνεσθαι), which evolves as an event of existential encounter between heterogeneities with reference to the transcendental (cf. Loudovikos 2020, 305). It is obvious even for the Church itself that this is an “open” question that is addressed not only at the level of Anthropology, but also at the level of Theology. Within the ecclesial “Polis” the constant and perpetual struggle of every human being to discover his or her identity is directly linked to the struggle to pursue God (cf. Loudovikos 2020, 305).

7.3 Ecclesia as a Polis within the global framework of Cosmo-Polis

The Church constitutes a “city”, i.e. a way of politically existing in the world (cf. Papanikolaou 2017, 231). The “political” nature of the Church, of course, is understood in terms of its specific theological dimensions. Thus, the Church invites the whole world to participate in its life in Christ. This invitation has an ecumenical and universal dimension, while being, at the same time, it is oriented towards an eschatological perspective. However, taking into account the political reality on a global level, we find that the Church is a “Polis” among other “Poleis”; it is a way of existing and cooperating with one another in the world, but it is not the only one. The public space, as we



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observe by studying Benner's pedagogical theory, is the meeting ground of many different domains of human action, each of which has its own rationale as well as a relative autonomy. It should be noted that each separate field of action constitutes a space of society in itself, within which man's action manifests itself as co-action, i.e., as a meeting of heterogeneities. This suggests that the totality of human action in society is composed of differentiated public, so to speak, subspaces of action; these subspaces together constitute the public space as the totality of social reality (Benner 2014b, 131). In this perspective, the Church - speaking in terms of political theory - is a part of the public space totality and constitutes a “political” way of life, i.e., a “Polis” that develops within - and not outside- an environment of miscellaneous diversity (cf. Stamoulis 2015, 231). Aristotle Papanikolaou moves in this direction by introducing into the theological debate the term “public ecclesiology” (Papanikolaou 2017, 231).

The correlation of Ecclesiology with the public sphere implicates that the Church as a “Polis” is called and challenged to co-exist in the public sphere with other “Poleis” i.e., with other spaces of human action, which have the right to be recognized as equal interlocutors, while at the same time they have a relative autonomy as well as a specific competence for action (cf. Kalaitzidis 2007, 153). This reality neither weakens nor diminishes the work and mission of the Church; on the contrary, it is a challenge, based on which it has the opportunity to intensify its efforts for carrying out its mission. Since, by its nature, it attempts an “exodus” and an “opening” to the world, it is understandable that meeting the world as a dialogue with diversity is on the agenda of its mission. The Church has to be in dialogue with the world, and this is manifested in fact as a struggle and concern a. for understanding the “language” of the world, its particular differentiated and various rationales, b. for understanding its diversity, c. for showing respect towards its spiritual quests, d. for recognition of its humanistic achievements, e. for honest communication and finding points of encounter, and f. for “translating” its own way of thinking and living into the societies of the modern world by using a “language” that is understandable on public discourse and “resistant” to public exposure. And since the purpose of the Church is the transformation of the world in Christ, it is understandable that it should strive, not only to be in dialogue with the world, but also to renew the world in Christ.



This perspective correlates with its commitment to stand by the side of each human being who is unjust and oppressed by the problems of life, expressing bravely its opposition using clear and open terms against any form of undermining and circumvention of the freedom of the human person, for which Christ was crucified and resurrected (cf. Kalaitzidis 2007, 515). The fact that the Church cannot live otherwise, if only when it is in dialogue with otherness and when it cares for its fellow human being who suffers, is an evident proof that it constitutes itself as a “political” way of being. Undoubtedly, its members, as they experience the renewal of the world in Christ through the Holy Eucharist, strive to act in the world as “citizens” who perceive their role and realize their responsibility within a universal and worldwide public sphere. Thus, each member of the Church becomes a “citizen” of a cosmo-“polis”, a “citizen” of the world, i.e. a cosmo-“citizen” (cf. Kotsiopoulos 2020, 133f).

8. Conclusions

With the present study we have delineated that the dialogue with diversity constitutes a structural element on the basis of which the public space is constituted. In other words, it is not possible for the public space as such to exist if the coexistence of diversity is not provided. Moreover, we have seen that Religious Education Course at school should focus on the public function of religion, which includes, among other things, the competence of students to be into dialogue with religious diversity within the framework of the public space. Finally, by exploring our theme in the light of Orthodox theology, it has become clear that dialogue with diversity is not just a political or pedagogical necessity; it is also an essential condition characterizing the spiritual life of the Church and of each believer as its member. Thus, a Religious Education Course, in which learning contents are basically related to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, can provide pupils with a suitable paradigm about the question of what the meaning of living as a political entity within the framework of a global and universal public space is.



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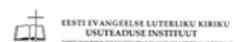
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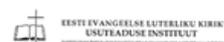
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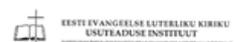
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