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FROM INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING TO INTERWORLDVIEW EDUCATION

EDITED BY

DIDIER POLLEFEYT

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INTERWORLDVIEW COMPETENCIES IN WORLDVIEW EDUCATION

THE PATH TO UNLOCKING OUR OWN NARROW CONFESSIONAL WORLDVIEW

I. Introduction

Studies have not yet suggested whether there are differences in educational impact in school systems that implement a policy of separation between religion and state versus those that adopt religious education as part of their curriculum. In fact, in many instances, it is not up to the school system to decide but it is for policy makers, religious figures, and politicians. Nevertheless, it is worth examining forms of spiritual learning, including worldview education, to increase the educational benefits to learners and meet their needs. The arguments behind the call to democratize and modernize religious education in Muslim countries may also be applicable in Western countries that offer a narrow orientation of religious and/or worldview education. The idea behind a worldview education is that every pupil deserves to develop their own worldview including their faith and religious beliefs. According to G. Bertram-Troost (in this volume, 113-134) this process is developmental and changes as young people interact with others and develop their own religious identity.

When examined closely, citizenship education holds a set of competencies that we may agree are important for functioning in secular and democratic societies as well as religious ones. Nevertheless, in the context of religious education, a core question around the competencies that are most essential is a legitimate one. We argue that the sets of competencies needed in frameworks such as ethics and moral education, psychosocial competencies for well-being, socio-emotional learning, multiculturalism, or multi-worldviews are essentially similar. This is not a new idea as a 1996 UNESCO report highlighted the ‘learning to be’ as one of four pillars of education along with the learning to know, learning to do (competencies), and learning to live with others. In fact, interworldview competencies may offer a middle way between the two systems: the secular system that separates between religion and state and the religious education and worldview education models that exist in some countries and educational systems where pupils have the right to learn their religion within the public school system, sometimes referred to as worldview education. Interworldview involves the ability to look inward and outward and to be smart in intrapersonal as well as interpersonal skills; it is what van der Kooij and colleagues name as organized or personal worldviews[1]. The organized worldviews belong to the group belief systems while the personal worldviews belong to the individual. In other words, it is education of the whole person we seek so that human beings can achieve psychological well-being, health, and spiritual well-being[2]. Whether they reach that through organized religious education or a secular education is open to discussion and should be a personal decision.

Developing interworldview competencies, as opposed to one worldview, is a key strategy in advancing multicultural and multireligious education. It is at the heart of building and sustaining a healthy and inclusive society where diversity, including religious, is acknowledged and respected. A competency-based education is used as a generic term to include a set of skills that all stakeholders will agree are important for life in the twenty-first century. Whether we call those socio-emotional learning skills, multicultural, or interworldviews, the competencies are similar and essential, and they need to be named. For example, cognitive competencies such as problem solving and emotional ones such as self-regulation (self-awareness in the model below) are needed in any framework. The challenge we see is in pedagogy and curriculum and the ability to teach those skills and systematically integrate them into any set curriculum. Many other competencies may be associated with interworldviews, such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and forgiveness. However, regardless of the number of necessary competencies that young pupils and adult students in formal and informal education settings need to acquire, the social, political, religious, and cultural systems and structures that shape the context of young peoples' lives often determine their willingness and ability to engage in a process of interworldview learning. There is a serious challenge of introducing these competencies and having institutional entry or access to address them in confessional worldview education systems.

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[1] J.C. van der Kooij – D.J. de Ruyter – S. Miedema, *Can We Teach Morality without Influencing the Worldview of Students?*, in *Journal of Religious Education* 63 (2015) 79-93.

[2] A. Bożek – P.F. Nowak – M. Blukacz, *The Relationship between Spirituality, Health-Related Behavior, and Psychological Well-Being*, in *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020) 1-13; https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01997.

II. INTERWORLDVIEW COMPETENCIES

Is it possible that education and learning essential socio-emotional skills can offer a needed entry point for interworldview education?

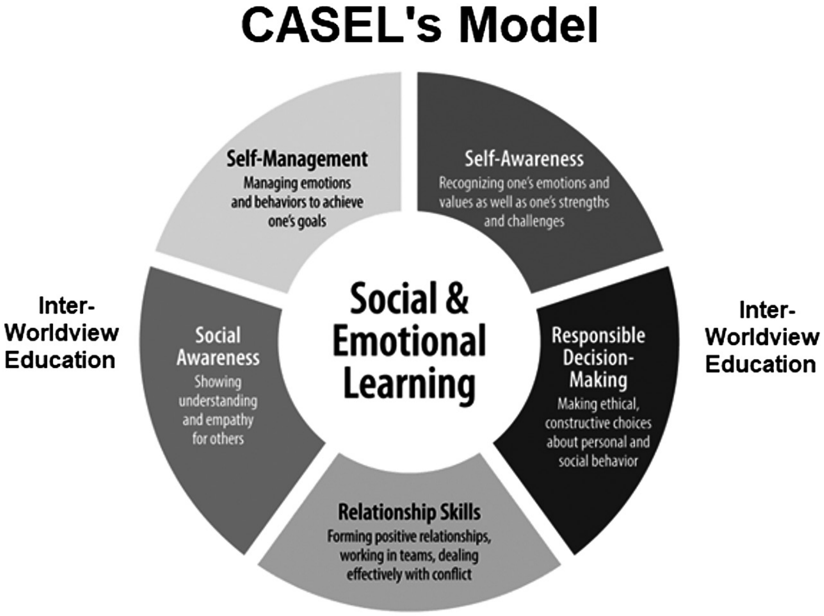
CASEL's Model
Self-Management
Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals
Self-Awareness
Recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and challenges
Inter-Worldview Education
Social Awareness
Showing understanding and empathy for others
Social & Emotional Learning
Responsible Decision-Making
Making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior
Inter-Worldview Education
Relationship Skills
Forming positive relationships, working in teams, dealing effectively with conflict

Figure 1: https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/

Studies have suggested that socio-emotional skills are integral to education, human development, and to preparing the younger generation for a complex world. It is also positively linked to academic achievement[3]. An educational framework based on years of research by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines socio-emotional learning (SEL) as the

> process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions[4].

---

[3] J.A. DURLAK – R.P. WEISSBER – A.B. DYMNICKI – R.D. TAYLOR – K. SCHELLINGER, *The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions*, in *Child Development* 82 (2011) 405-432.

[4] https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/.

There is weight to the emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of human development and learning when addressing interworldviews as part of a SEL framework that should also include education (SEEL), hence adapting the SEL to include education and more specifically worldview education (see adapted Figure 1 based on CASEL). In contexts where there is a challenge to introduce an interworldview perspective and/or gain access in a confessional worldview environment, SEEL may provide an institutional entry point, especially because it bypasses the controversies around the purpose of education. SEEL competencies may replace the call for moral education (character or value education) which was prominent in the 1980s.

According to Thornberg and Oguz, a value is "an overarching concept that includes areas such as moral education, character education, ethics education, civic education, and citizenship education"[5]. And, as Lickona suggests, it is also a drive to help humans live together and in community with others[6]. For us, universal values are macro principles for the common good that guide a person or a group on how to expand beyond themselves to meet others who have other faiths and belief systems. Competencies that are part of SEEL are very specific for the individual and the collective (the interaction between the individual and the group). Still, value-based education has re-emerged as a prime focus in the curriculum in some school systems and higher education institutions, to develop "ethical reasoning" and decision making as part of the twenty-first-century educational outcomes[7].

In the Muslim context, calls among Islamic educators to bring values back into the classroom because of their universal relevance and Islamic grounding have intensified. For example, Yap contends that including Islam's universal values as an alternative framework provides another avenue for exploring the more prominent moral and ethical aspects of educational decision-making[8]. In addition, Zeiger *et al.* posit that universal values are also seen to prevent and counter extremism[9]. Our argument

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5. R. Thornberg – E. Oguz, *Moral and Citizenship Educational Goals in Values Education: A Cross-Cultural Study of Swedish and Turkish Student Teachers' Preferences*, in *Teaching and Teacher Education* 55 (2016) 110-121.

6. T. Lickona, *The Return of Character Education*, in *Educational Leadership* 51/3 (1993) 6-11.

7. O. Acar – L. Turkemen – A. Roychoudhury, *Student Difficulties in Socio-Scientific Argumentation and Decision-Making Research Findings: Crossing the Borders of Two Research Lines*, in *The International Journal of Science Education* 32 (2010) 1191-1206.

8. S.F. Yap, *Beliefs, Values, Ethics and Moral Reasoning in Socio-Scientific Education*, in *Issues in Educational Research* 24 (2014) 299-319.

9. S. Zeiger – A. Rogelio – J. Herrera (eds.), *Enhancing Women's Roles in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)* (NATO Science for Peace and Security Series – E: Human and Societal Dynamics, 144), Amsterdam, IOS Press, 2019.

is that values are critical for the human development and learning and hence should be part of any interworldview education, especially when 84 percent of the world's population claims a specific religion/faith and/or a spiritual belief system[10]. We further argue to explicitly weave value-worldview education in schooling as part of SEEL competencies expressed in Figure 1 above.

III. Transformation to Achieve an Interworldview: Examples from Muslim Contexts

Changing one's own worldview and adopting a new multi-worldview perspective is a painful, long, and nonlinear process. The process encompasses two pillars or skill sets for information processing and regulating emotional reactions. This section shares some lessons learned in the context of interfaith and interreligious dialogue and education in Muslim societies to illustrate the dynamics of introducing interworldview competencies in this context. For example, in a series of social media trainings for interreligious and intercultural dialogues conducted with Middle Eastern and African groups, the organizers introduced religious diversity and faith-based values of compassion, solidarity, justice, peace, etc. The participants were young fellows from religious and civil society organizations, who learned how to utilize religious texts, scriptures, symbols, rituals, and other religious identity components to spread the message of diversity and nonviolence in their societies. In such informal educational setting, the incorporation of interreligious worldview was not only a useful tool to effectively engage a wider audience in the Arab (Muslim and Christian) communities, but it was accepted and expected as a necessary narrative and vehicle to introduce an interworldview that is suitable to the context.

In a workshop with secondary religious education teachers in Jordan on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, one teacher refused to respond when a dilemma on gender roles was introduced to his group. He immediately claimed (using one-worldview) "this dilemma is already resolved because our religion tells us exactly how males and females should or should not interact". This teacher did not understand or agree that even within Islam there are many interpretations and understandings of holy scriptures and that his response not only did not allow any space for critical thinking, but he also silenced his colleagues who may disagree or have a different nuanced response. The facilitator opened the question to the group, asking if they agree or not and sure enough, they did not agree with this approach. In this scenario, the group functioned as a support system to the group leaders. Even if the teacher did not change his ideas and beliefs, the group had gained legitimacy to question people who present such a one sided and unidimensional worldview and hence can gain new skills and competencies.

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[10] Pew Research Center, 2012; https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/ (retrieved in November 2021).

Another example at a workshop in East Africa with principals and lead staff at religious Islamic schools, the environment of skepticism was immediately apparent when one principal talked about the need to discipline children instead of talking to them and having a dialogue and an open-ended conversation. For that principal, it was clear that he does not have enough information on learning theories and child development milestones. The facilitator had to absorb the reaction expressed by the principal without judgment. She responded by explaining to the group the critical aspects of learning and safety in the interaction with adults around the learner. Otherwise, the pupil will be occupied with his or her safety. The principal politely sat down and did not comment. On day five of the training course, he stood up and shared his thoughts about what she said on learning and the brain and that he is willing and ready to try new ways. In this scenario, a lot of modelling must occur as part of the capacity building process. For example, in this training the trainer started the morning every day of the course with a reflection circle, allowing those who are standing on the fence of worldviews to move closer to the other side.

Obviously, there are many factors that determine the willingness and capacity of the person to cope with a change in worldviews, nevertheless those worldviews that are rooted in religious or confessional beliefs tend to be more difficult to shift. Some sociology of religion studies have already established the functions of faith in human lives, especially in situations of fear, helplessness, and uncertainty[11]. Imposing confessional worldviews on others has been the objective of many wars in human history. Thus, in any encounter between people from different faiths, there is a great risk and danger associated with any attempt or hint of possible change in one's faith. In fact, fear of conversion has been one of the main obstacles used by those who opposed the interfaith encounter[12]. Despite this risk, in every religious tradition throughout history, there have been processes of reinterpretation and re-examination of texts and their meanings for followers and their relationships with outsiders. This shift in confessional worldview can result in a movement in both directions, a more inclusive and relativist or multiconfessional worldview or more exclusivist and absolutist perspectives in relation to different identities.

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[11] V. Alan – M. Tamir, *Fear Not: Religion and Emotion Regulation in Coping with Existential Concerns*, in K.E. Vail III – C. Routledge (eds.), *The Science of Religion, Spirituality, and Existentialism*, Cambridge, MA, Elsevier Academic Press, 2020, 325-338.

[12] M. Shafiq – M. Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims*, Herndon, VA, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011.

Although different in their theological ideologies, followers and leaders of ISIS, right wing Buddhist para militia in Myanmar or Sri Lanka, Jewish settlers in Palestinian occupied territories, and extreme White Nationalists in the US reflect the exclusivist confessional political worldview. In the same faith, we find groups who have adopted a multi-worldview framework or orientation that moves them to accept the notion of religious pluralism which allows them to live with those who are different without feeling threatened. To move on the below scale from extreme exclusivist position, rejecting or denying those who are different from living in the same space, towards the position of the pluralist who endorses inclusivity and sharing the public space between various worldviews, is certainly a life journey. The movement is not linear from one side to the other, but people can experience movement towards either side depending on the issue, nature of the relationship with the other, and timing of the interaction they are dealing with[13].

Absolutist/Exclusivist ⟷ **Inclusivist/Pluralist**

In a study of youth in 15 Muslim societies, additional qualities that are mostly teachable were found to potentially support the personal transformation from one worldview to multi- and interworldviews. These were identified as open-mindedness, personal responsibility, and a collaborative collective[14]. In the study, the three transformative qualities were defined as:

- *Open-mindedness* is a virtue or a value that involves skills such as the ability to think things through, to adapt and maneuver in solving problems with critical thinking skills, and to examine all sides and perspectives[15].

---

13. M.J. Bennett, *Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*, in R.M. Paige (ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, Yarmouth, ME, Intercultural Press, 1993, 21-71; M. Abu-Nimer, *Conflict Resolution Training in the Middle East: Lessons to Be Learned*, in *International Negotiation: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 3 (1998) 99-116.

14. I. Nasser – M. Saroughi – L. Shelby, *Advancing Education in Muslim Societies: Mapping the Terrain Study. 2019-2020 Report*, Herndon, VA, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2020.

15. R.T. Proyer – F. Gander – T. Wyss – W. Ruch, *The Relation of Character Strengths to Past, Present, and Future Life Satisfaction among German-Speaking Women*, in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 3 (2011) 370-384.

- *Responsibility* refers to having agency and the capability to proactively manage and control functions and actions. It highlights humans' potential to carry on a responsibility towards the self and others.
- The *collaborative collective* builds on the sense of community and shared values that drive the understanding that it is not sufficient to rely on the immediate community alone, but also on a broader collective that encourages interdependence for the betterment of life for all. Creating this type of classroom community can build a collective.

In the same study, young Muslim youth had the opportunity to express their views on values, faith, and personal transformation, as well as reflect on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Muslim contexts. According to Jolliffe and Farrington, individuals who can relativize their beliefs to consider others' perspectives – and who are ready to change their cognitive schemata if justified – may also have the capacity to empathize and feel what other persons feel, and to understand other individuals' feelings[16]. Competencies such as empathy, self-regulation, and meaning making are essential to the three qualities explored and provide evidence for the importance of religiosity as a value that correlates with open mindedness, responsibility, and a sense of a collective community[17]. It is clear from other studies that all the mentioned qualities promote an interworldview orientation and, as a result, an overall sense of psychosocial well-being[18].

A unique quality that was also explored in the mentioned study and proved to be predictive of other competencies is having a strong sense of belonging to the institution, which in turn may support the community and collective orientation and motivate people to change. In the study in Muslim societies, it was important for youth to feel included, accepted, cared for, and supported[19]. A strong sense of belonging is suggested to be strongly predicted by social support, as social support has been found to be positively correlated with coping mechanisms, physical and socio-emotional well-being. Teachers, instructors, and religious leaders can play important roles in bringing these skills to the teaching situation. They can empower pupils to be proud of the institution and have a high sense of belonging and support.

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[16] D. Jolliffe – D.P. Farrington, *Development and Validation of the Basic Empathy Scale*, in *The Journal of Adolescence* 29 (2006) 589-611.

[17] I. Nasser – M. Saroughi – L. Shelby, *Advancing Education in Muslim Societies: Mapping the Terrain*, in *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies* 2/2 (2021) 90-102.

[18] N. Liberman – D.C. Molden – L.C. Idson – E.T. Higgins, *Promotion and Prevention Focus on Alternative Hypotheses: Implications for Attributional Functions*, in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80 (2001) 5-18.

[19] C. Goodenow – K.E. Grady, *The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends' Values to Academic Motivation among Urban Adolescent Students*, in *The Journal of Experimental Education* 62 (1993) 60-71.

IV. Sorting Facts from Illusions: Obstacles to Personal Transformation

Examples from interfaith and interethnic work show some of the dilemmas and difficulties around systematic and comprehensive transformation from the exclusive to the inclusive. The shift in perspective on one social issue or problem does not mean an immediate shift in the person's perspectives on other issues. Every person is subject to having his/her own blind spots. For example, in many encounters between Israelis and Palestinians, participants who seem to be extremely committed and inclusive and hold a pluralist view on gender issues, find themselves on the exclusivist and absolutist side on the national or religious issues. Similar dynamics took place among Christians and Muslims in Mindanao when dealing with ownership of land versus gender relations. A Muslim seemed to be able to empathize and understand the pluralist gender relations exhibited by Christians from the north, however when the issue shifted to historical grievances over land, the same person found himself denying any rights or grievances of Christians who have lived in Mindanao for over a century.

Additional examples from years of interfaith work suggest difficulties in reconciling the different truths and balancing emotions because of shocking discoveries. For a young Muslim participant in a social media encounter or training to discover that his parents have indoctrinated him to think that his sectarian Sunni identity is superior to the other Muslim sects (Shia, Ahmadi, Alawi, Druze, etc.) can stir strong feelings and defensiveness. The realization of sharing overwhelming similarities with such groups can cause the young man to doubt his core beliefs that his version of Islamic interpretation is not only different but better than others. In another example, when after three days of a dialogue encounter on ethnic conflicts in south Asia, a young participant realizes that other participants who shared with him the same political views and many other religious values have different sexual orientations. This realization triggered a strong emotional reaction. Managing the emotional stress produced by these new levels of awareness is crucial for maintaining and cementing the newly acquired multi-worldview.

Meeting and engaging with the worldview of the other are the core steps that everyone needs to be prepared for from an early age. Early childhood education theories provide us with ample evidence that the formation of the self is primarily dependent on the interaction with the other starting with the family, the community, and the larger society[20].

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[20] U. Bronfenbrenner, *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, Milwaukee, WI, Family Service America, 1990.

Thus, there is no doubt that delaying the encounter with others and different worldviews can be limiting to a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development in the twenty-first century[21]. Gaining positive and constructive experiences when meeting people with other worldviews requires specific structural conditions and individual competencies. Otherwise, the encounter can produce the opposite outcome and cause the person to acquire negative perceptions and become more defensive of his/her own worldview. It may be the case that negative worldviews develop in the absence of these conditions, especially in violent conflict zones in which there is little space for positive encounters with the other. Similarly, continuous exposure to negative media images of certain groups can influence the worldview of a child and hinder his/her capacity to respect or accept this group, based on media and social media only. The following addresses some of the individual obstacles and difficulties in the change process from one- to multi-worldviews. One should note that although these are not necessarily system-wide obstacles, they can be affected by governmental policies and political dynamics of conflicts. Nevertheless, these are individual and personal difficulties that may stand in the way of transition from the one worldview to multiple ones such as in the examples above.

1. *Ignorance of the Other's Worldviews*

Ignorance constitutes the core obstacle that allows people to continue and hold their own categorical prejudice and negative perception against those who hold different views. For example, in the context of interfaith dialogue, participants discover that after a brief encounter with other faith groups that the others have their own truths, and they believe in them as strongly as they themselves do. Such a discovery shocks those who suffered from a strong case of deep denial of the other truths. Admitting to ourselves that we do not know everything and that there are many truths and many perspectives on every issue that we try to analyze or understand is a first step to begin our journey in the development of a pluralist multi-worldview. Overcoming the tendency to automatically defend our own national, gender, ethnic, and religious beliefs to name a few is the most difficult, yet necessary step in this process.

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[21] M. ABU-NIMER – I. NASSER, *Linking Peacebuilding and Child Development: A Basic Framework*, in J.F. LECHMAN – C. PANTER-BRICK – R. SALAH (eds.), *Pathways to Peace: The Transformative Power of Children and Families*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2014, 323-338.

2. *Inability to Differentiate between Facts and Myths*

In the current reality with an overwhelming amount of information, images, and data thrown at each of us constantly with or without our permission, it may be difficult to distinguish between facts and myths. Therefore, once we have taken the step towards admitting our ignorance, the next crucial step is the building or strengthening of the ability to apply analytical tools to critically sort out the information. In a conflict situation there are many social, political, media, religious, economic, educational, or other agencies who have been mobilized by each side to continue to justify violence and support existing narratives. For example, the narrative 'they hate us' can be maintained by media images, selective stories in newspapers, and different images and techniques on social media outlets. The term 'they' has been deployed by many groups: Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Jewish, Hindus, Americans, Chinese, French, Germans, etc. to single out a specific group of people. Regardless of the case, certain communities in each of these groups have used the argument that other groups 'hate us' and we need to defend ourselves from 'them'. This categorical generalization is a powerful tool to mobilize and polarize sides in any given conflict. Once a young person is caught up in this spiral of 'us versus them' it becomes extremely challenging to shift this perception. It requires certain structural conditions and competencies to untangle one's own cognitive pull out of this web. A necessary step in the development of a constructive multi-worldview is to learn competencies, such as those mentioned earlier including problem solving and the ability to verify information. This allows one to sort out the categorical negative generalizations and propaganda (national, religious, sexual orientation, gender, racial, etc.) utilized by one's own group as well as other groups.

3. *Inability to Manage and Balance Emotions*

Constructively coping with the process of changing one's own worldview and gaining a wider perspective in evaluating every issue, especially in conflicts or contradictory matters facing us throughout our lives, requires certain levels of emotional and cognitive balance that develop through processes of self and emotional regulations[22]. Later, the child must also acquire emotional intelligence skills such as regulation and reading others' reactions and empathy. Such competencies enhance people's capacity to deal with the stress associated with changing perceptions and ways of thinking about race, ethnicity, gender, and religion – especially when such perceptions are associated with loyalties to close family or peers. The focus of the SEEL model on emotional awareness and regulation suggests the importance of developing these skills early in life.

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[22] NASSER – SAROUGHI – SHELBY, *Advancing Education in Muslim Societies* (n. 17).

4. *Lacking a Critical Thinking Orientation*

While a unidimensional worldview thrives on the lack of information (ignorance), continuous belief in myths, and fear and shame of changing perspectives, the lack of critical examination of our own worldview is even more limiting to our personal and professional growth. Critical thinking, especially the art of asking meaningful questions, is the basic tool that allows youth to begin unlocking their confined unidimensional ethnic, national, or religious worldviews. Learning to ask questions about one's own faith is painful and requires a great deal of courage, especially if you are a child or teenager who has been instructed by your parents to obey elders, teachers, or authority figures. Thus, questioning the teacher becomes a revolutionary act which requires the individual to calculate the cost to him/her and assess the price they are willing to pay for posing such questions.

In some Quranic schools, Yeshiva, Buddhist, and Hindu temples, and Christian Sunday schools, children are taught for many years to memorize and believe without questioning or applying reasoning to understanding the text. Rote memorization without critical thinking creates fertile soil to produce unidimensional religious perspectives that reject and deny the existence of other truths or even the right for others to exist in the same world. Educational methodologies based on indoctrination have been identified as damaging and destructive to the individual and community's capacities to tolerate differences or live peacefully with those who think differently[23]. The effect of such one-sided national, ethnic, and religious indoctrination can be seen among certain segments of the communities in intractable and deep-rooted conflict areas, such as Israel and Palestine, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Nigeria, or Northern Ireland. Raising a generation of youth on the assumption that everyone from the other side is an enemy and cannot be trusted prevents them from learning new information or considering alternative perspectives, which risks continuing circles of intolerance and violence. Critical thinking is a tool that can help lift the younger generation out of this on-going circle.

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23. D. BURDMAN, *Education, Indoctrination, and Incitement: Palestinian Children on Their Way to Martyrdom*, in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15 (2003) 96-123.

V. EDUCATING FOR INTERWORLDVIEW COMPETENCIES

1. *An Infusion Approach*

There is something to be said regarding the benefits of worldview education versus citizenship education in promoting a more holistic approach to development and learning. In cases, like Belgium and the Netherlands, where there is a defined worldview education (as part of religious education), it may be beneficial to include some of the above competencies (including faith-based values from other religions) that are needed to strengthen multi- and interworldviews to reach more inclusive societies and communities. These may be infused in education encounters and schooling experiences and should be authentic and localized. Few of those examples may involve the following:

1. Education for empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, and community mindedness among others should be infused in teacher education and professional development of novice and veteran teachers and educators, including those in worldview and religious education. This is a needed investment in teachers and their tool kits.
2. Model interworldview skills and discuss relevant situations (teachable moments). Show self and emotional regulation, empathy, and gratitude as well as other virtues and competencies.
3. Intentionally offer developmentally and culturally competent and religiously sensitive instruction and community-building activities.
4. Provide the pupils in religious education with the opportunities to interact and reach out beyond their school and community and *vice versa*.
5. Design programs to deepen understanding of faith and strengthen the sense of belonging of youth. The goal is to live with others (similar and different) in mutual respect and advocate for justice.
6. Focus on shared values and competencies such as empathy, hope, and forgiveness (and others relevant to context) and teach them across worldview education classes.
7. Build the capacity of youth to assume leadership. This can be done through partnerships with other organizations and different faith groups.

2. *Investment in Dialogue*

When individuals practice their own interworldview and any of the above skills, they are often faced with contextual internal and external barriers that obstruct their or their group's capacity to carry out multi-worldview actions. In a conflict dynamic setting, there are systematic, institutional, social, cultural, and structural arrangements which inherently support an exclusivist worldview. When individuals or groups attempt to change or engage with the different other, especially in conflict areas, they are often faced with shaming, social sanctions, or even excommunication. Statements such as: "How can you be so blind and not see their true nature?; Why can you not see the truth on this issue? How can you consider yourself true follower of our faith? You are not a true believer? Do you want to become a traitor?". Constructively coping with these external contextual pressures is crucial for forming and sustaining a multi-worldview. Dialogue structures and spaces can be effective and nurturing in equipping participants with useful skills and competencies to handle pressures produced by the individuals themselves or by their affiliate groups. The inconsistency of individual or group narratives in dealing with different worldviews from their own are 'blind spots' that block the development of a multi-worldview orientation. Shedding light on these blind spots allows the individual to become more aware of his/her cognitive and emotional inconsistencies in dealing with those who hold different worldviews.

Dialogue is an effective tool that helps the discovery of these blind spots and allows the person to self-reflect and develop constructive ways to manage relationships with different identity groups. The dialogue process is about building a container or a space for individuals and groups to critically examine their current and past perceptions and judgments of themselves and others. Dialogue also deals with misperceptions and negative assumptions that fuel negative attitudes and justify exclusion and discrimination. In-depth, dialogue can unveil the fear of the other and guarantee a safe space to delve into difficult and painful issues in the relationship with the other. Such a process can gradually help in confronting fears of trusting the other and believing in the possibilities to find mutual ground and overcome animosities that are necessary to build and sustain peaceful relations. Thus, dialogue skills are a necessary competency for youth in developing multi-worldview perspectives.

The dialogical encounter is a platform that allows participants to look at themselves through the other. A dialogical encounter is contrary to what many people think or describe; it is not about meeting the other. It is about meeting oneself and confronting one's own negative images and biases of the other. The other in this process functions as a mirror to the self. For a European Christian who held many Islamophobic views, meeting and dialogically engaging with a professional Muslim woman wearing headscarf in a safe and structured space allowed him/her to question assumptions and misperceptions. When this participant found himself asking in a group: "Why did I think this way before this meeting? What was I afraid of?". The answers to these questions emerged from the person rather than the other who holds a different worldview.

In the encounter, the other shows us what we think and feel. The other becomes the reflection of our own feelings and asks risky questions that we would not otherwise ask if we were not forced to meet the other in a trusting environment. Moreover, a dialogical encounter pushes the participant to meet his/her own fears about those whom he/she thinks are similar or different. A meeting in which the person uncovers feelings and attitudes that have been carried over time and had been preventing the acceptance of the other, or even sometimes justifying the use of violence, is painful. For example, in a dialogue setting, when two American participants from different racial groups meet in a dialogical encounter, they will have to confront each other's questions, fears, and perceptions about causes of their interracial relations: "Why were blacks subject to slavery in American history? What are the implications of this racial slave system on our own current reality? What is the individual responsibility of each person in this relationship? What does it mean to be non-white in the current American context?".

A dialogical encounter contains certain dynamics that facilitate a painful process of self-discovery, which has been prohibited or blocked, intentionally or unintentionally, by social agencies. In deep-rooted and intractable conflict dynamics, the blocking of such a process is done intentionally by most socialization agencies in the conflict area. For example, the formal media outlets in Sri Lanka, Philippines, or Israel and Palestine are rewarded or sanctioned for portraying the enemy in certain ways. A society with all its agencies has conspired against its members to prohibit and prevent everyone, especially children, from dialogically meeting the other and continue to hold an exclusivist confessional or nationalistic worldview. Two Iraqi Kurdish and Arab or Shia and Sunni participants who met in an encounter are victims of being raised in isolated ethnic and religious enclaves for decades. These social, political, and educational structures deprived them from meeting each other in a safe space to deepen their understanding of each other from an early age. Thus, the skills of engaging in self-critical examination regarding the other (whether it be an enemy, a different religion, or culture) are often lacking in this context. In fact, it can be highly dangerous to publicly speak about the perspective of other faith groups or their truths, especially when there is an on-going conflict with such groups. Being accused of betrayal or treason is just one of the potential consequences that a daring person can face from his/her own community (or even family). For example, if an Azeri citizen speaks about the Armenian perspective on the Nagorno-Karabakh War and subsequent clashes, it can cost him/her his/her own career if not citizenship.

There are conditions to establishing a dialogue that is meaningful and constructive. It must be intentional, structured, controlled, and has a sustainable framework and design. Dialogue is not debate or spontaneous discussion in a coffee shop or a talk show. The setting of a dialogue process requires careful selection of the participants, methodological construction to have a clear set of steps, roles, and expectations of outcomes. In a classroom setting, the dialogue process requires the educator to have facilitation skills that allows him/her to build and encourage trust and honesty among the pupils. Such dialogue skills will allow pupils to confront controversial and difficult issues that teachers often avoid or neglect in their daily interactions with pupils.

In the process of a dialogue the person's awareness and capacities to deal with differences can be transformed. In racial encounters in the USA, there are many testimonies and much empirical evidence of participants significantly shifting their view and learning to adopt a multiracial worldview[24]. Similarly, interfaith dialogue processes produce effects on participants who begin to practice their multifaith orientation when dealing with controversial faith issues. For example, in Pakistan, a Sunni participant in an educational training confessed that because of his experience in the intervention program, he altered his views on relationship with Shia and Christian minorities in his town. "We even accepted them to visit our mosque", he declared[25].

3. *Exercising Empathy*

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand others' emotion, the willingness to care, feel, and take the perspective of others and be responsive to their needs. Empathy has been mostly studied in the developmental psychology field; scholars such as Davis emphasize both cognitive and affective perspectives of empathy[26]. Many cognitive theorists argue that empathy is grounded in social understanding and is used interchangeably with compassion for others' welfare and state of being. Empathy is found to be a predictor of forgiveness and other prosocial constructs[27]. Moral and philosophical theorists, however, suggest that empathy refers to an individual's sympathetic response to others' suffering and deliberate effort to understand, communicate, and act based on others' perspectives[28]. This understanding and responsiveness leads to development of trust and intimacy among individuals. Empathy is an important value and skill that has positive association with social and communication skills and moral judgment[29]. Empathy is teachable and can be included in the curriculum. Research findings show that adolescents and university students who were taught empathy showed lower levels of hostility and aggression[30].

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[24] R. Brown – M. Hewstone, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Contact*, in M.P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, Cambridge, MA, Elsevier Academic Press, 2005, 255-343; M. Sherif, *Superordinate Goals in the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict*, in *The American Journal of Sociology* 63 (1958) 349-356.

[25] Evaluation of Quranic schools training in Pakistan. Salam Institute 2007. See www.salaminstitute.org.

[26] M.H. Davis, *Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach*, in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44 (1983) 113-126; Id., *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1994.

Empathy is a powerful communication tool that allows human beings to connect with each other on a deeper level despite their different worldviews. To exercise empathy the person does not need to accept or endorse the values and beliefs held by those who differ from him or her, but it is a way to assure those on the other side that their pain, concerns, fears, and needs are recognized and understood. This act often opens the gates for deeper human connection and allows those who hold grievances and a sense of victimhood to listen to other perspectives on the controversial issues. Without employing empathy, the speaker finds him/herself constantly occupied in defending his/her views and investing emotional and cognitive energy in persuading the audience that his or her claims need to be heard and recognized.

After accepting the principle that there are possible multiple worldviews on any given matter, especially regarding conflict issues related to

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27. I. Nasser – J. Cheema – M. Saroughi – A. Alwani, *Advancing Education in Muslim Societies: Mapping the Terrain Study. 2018-2019 Report*, Herndon, VA, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2019.

28. K. Horsthemke, *Epistemic Empathy*, in *Childrearing and Education* 10 (2015) 61-72; D. Zahavi – S. Overgaard, *Empathy without Isomorphism: A Phenomenological Account*, in J. Decety (ed.), *Empathy: From Bench to Bedside*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2011; S. Gair, *Feeling Their Stories: Contemplating Empathy, Insider/Outsider Positionings, and Enriching Qualitative Research*, in *Qualitative Health Research* 22 (2012) 134-143; M. Hojat, *Definitions and Conceptualization*, in Id. (ed.), *Empathy in Patient Care: Antecedents, Development, Measurement and Outcomes*, New York, Springer, 2007, 3-15.

29. E. Ahmetoglu – I.H. Acar, *The Correlates of Turkish Preschool Preservice Teachers' Social Competence, Empathy and Communication Skills*, in *European Journal of Contemporary Education* 16 (2016) 188-197.

30. R. Castillo – J.M. Salguero – P. Fernández-Berrocal – N. Balluerka, *Effects of an Emotional Intelligence Intervention on Aggression and Empathy among Adolescents*, in *The Journal of Adolescence* 36 (2013) 883-892.

ethnicity, religion, race, gender, etc., it is important to learn to exercise empathy. Identities cannot be fully experienced or achieved without the individual's capacity to empathize with the other. Empathy is the skill that allows the person to temporarily delve into the other's perspective or worldview and establish a unique connection based on the message "I understand and feel what you are trying to say or what you are going through". Exercising empathy from one religious perspective to another is challenging. In a religious worldview that is based on the premise that a person's belief system is the absolute truth and no one else's belief can be true, empathizing with members of other faith groups is highly unlikely and can even be perceived as a sin or betrayal of one's own faith. For example, in a dialogical encounter when a Christian participant asked members of the group in their second day of the encounter to join him in praising the Lord Jesus, most of the secular, Muslim, Jewish, and even some other Christian members refused and even found it challenging to articulate their resistance to such an act. Although there are many other factors that prevent members in an encounter from participating in joint prayers, nevertheless the lack of empathy towards the Christian participant who requested a joint prayer was clear in the resistance and the emotional reactions among many in the group.

VI. Final Thoughts

Despite the potential and even empirically supported impact of the above skills and competencies in shifting the individual's orientation from a one-worldview into a multi-worldview, we cannot ignore the power and influence of economic, political, and social structures that inherently block such changes. Dialogue, critical thinking, empathy, etc. alone could not end the apartheid system in South Africa, the occupation of Palestinian territories, or the discriminatory 'separate but equal' system in USA, etc. Nonviolent social and political movements for resistance and change are essential components in the formula for change. Dialogue, empathy, and the curriculum are not a substitute for social and political action. In fact, the core message of most of these nonviolent movements for change assumes multi-worldview to be an outcome of their desired change. Thus, youth engagement in these campaigns can be also a tool or venue for acquiring multi-worldview. In such settings, the encounter with the 'other' is structured and driven by the need to change policies and build new political arrangements that satisfy the identity needs of the diverse cultural, racial, religious, gender, and sexual orientation groups. This inclusive narrative is the manifestation of the multi-worldview that ought to be part of every education system. This is the only path we human beings have, to preserve our own unique identities, celebrate our diversity, and live peacefully in our biodiverse ecosystem.

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