Social Justice Education through Immersion: Encounter, Service or Solidarity?

Introduction

Service immersion experiences abound in many diverse educational and ministry settings. Youth groups go on service trips. Increasingly high school grads do gap years working or traveling prior to college, often engaging in service work. On the secondary and college level, cross-cultural immersions have become a popular form of education through international service-learning and global exchange programs. Study abroad and international mission trips can be found at diverse institutions that often single out the powerful effects of such learning encounters by naming them “high impact practices.”1 Following a college graduation a plethora of “volunteer year” offerings immerse young people in a vast variety of settings, often radically different than ones to which they are accustomed. Urban plunges or rural ministry immersions are often required for seminary degrees. And congregations of every denomination offer adults immersions focused on service, advocacy and education.

There is no question that immersion experiences are ubiquitous and multi-dimensional while often being associated with service and social justice education work. What is less common is a consistent language and purpose behind such immersion offerings. Some speak of service trips or plunges; others speak about alternative break mission trips; still others might name these offerings social justice immersions or even global community-based partnerships. Language of solidarity is often cited both from the lens of religion and social science. Immersions are also discussed from the development perspective as boundary-breaking experiences. The field of religious education2 can offer important contributions to this discussion of immersion experiences. In particular there has been considerable attention especially in the European context to the notion of encounter. Siebren Miedema (2009) notes that this emphasis originates in an effort to “realize interreligious education in public schools emphasizing dialogue and encounter.”3 Drawing from the scholarship of Miedema and others, especially the work of Hans-Gunter Heimbrock (2009), this paper first proposes that a deepened understanding of encounter positions immersion experiences to develop into relationships of solidarity.4 Multiple definitions of solidarity from the perspectives of social ethicists, Kurt Bayertz (1999) and Sallie Scholz (2008), are next explored. Then, gleaning from the trajectory of thought commenced by Paulo Freire (1970) and others, it is argued that the growth of solidarity be considered a chief goal of immersions. But how might an understanding of solidarity be enriched by a deeper appreciation of encounter?

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Encounter and Immersion

When university students from the USA travel to sites domestically and throughout the world to engage in service immersion, the first questions posed to students embarking on these experiences are often: what did you do? Did you build a house? Tutor children? The focus is often on actions and results. When teenagers are involved in synagogue or church-based service, possibly as part of Confirmation preparation, bar or bat mitzvah formation, or simply as a Sunday school assignment, there is often an emphasis on the number of hours completed as a very chief criterion for satisfying the assignment. In each of these examples the amount of time or the actual results of the service are primary features for assessing the significance of the project.

Without devaluing these dimensions, encounter immersions, as distinct from service hours and projects, focus first and foremost on people and relationships. Heimbrock (2009) describes the “phenomenon of encounter” as a social situation in which one interacts with someone other than oneself. In this interaction there is a “quality of difference.” Encounter means that subjects meet subjects and dwell intentionally in that space of interaction. The subject encountered is not valued as a means to an end (a host at a site; a tour guide, a social agency supervisor); rather the subject is valued as an end in his or her self. Employing the language and thought of Martin Buber, Heimbrock suggests that in encounters one moves from a detached and objective stance of “I-it,” to the engaged and subjective stance of “I-thou.” Difference is recognized and respected for what it is. Interpersonal interaction becomes the focus of the exchange.

A key vehicle to healthy and sustained encounter is dialogue. For the experience of encounter to be productive those planning immersion opportunities need to be intentional and pro-active to promote time and space for dialogue. Teachers and advisors of such immersions need, as Heimbrock advises, to remove themselves from the “guiding center of learning” and understand their role more as a facilitator of interaction within and beyond the group. In much of religious education literature, encounter is closely allied to interreligious understanding and appreciation. In cross-cultural service immersions, interreligious interaction is only one dimension of dialogue. Differences of race, ethnicity, economic background, gender, and cultural norms, amongst other areas, shape the overall experience of encounter. While immersions grounded in encounter may not devalue service by any means, they may understand service as best administered if it is rooted in relationships of trust generated through sustained dialogue. The tradition of encounter helps to ground immersions in people-centered dialogue as integral and not secondary to a project-oriented focus of immersion.

5 Heimbrock, 87
6 Heimbrock, 87
7 Heimbrock, 95
But do encounter immersions rooted in dialogue, relationship-building and service foster genuine solidarity? Or do these encounters generate meaningful yet simply passing conversations? In fact, could these experiences create a false sense of solidarity? In order to address these questions adequately it is important to explore more fully how contemporary religious education and social ethicists have understood this notion of solidarity.

When using the word “solidarity,” one could be referring to at least four different approaches to this word: social, moral, civic/welfare, and political/liberationist. The roots of social solidarity emerged in the thought of Rousseau, Comte, and Durkheim. While this notion develops in social thought through the nineteenth century labor movement, many other forces in society can produce a social solidarity. Sally Scholz characterizes social solidarity as being based primarily in shared human experience. This could be the human experience of suffering a common disease or sharing in a club or organization. A primary quality of social solidarity, according to Scholz, is the unity cultivated through the experience of being a part of a group. In higher education, the cultivation of class cohorts or alumni chapters relies on the same quality of groupness. Kurt Bayertz describes this sense of being part of a group as a “particularistic interpretation” of the term solidarity. In other words, participation in a group depends on fulfillment of a particular set of criteria – for example, shared illness, class or club membership.

Political solidarity differs from social solidarity in its capacity to rally a sense of cohesion against an unjust situation. It is rooted in a praxis of liberation and emphasizes the roles of conscience, commitment, and group responsibility. Scholz emphasizes the strong moral dimension of political solidarity. Bayertz points out how political solidarity involves more than working for a common cause; juntas and mafia groups do as much. The cause must be just. Scholz also proposes that political solidarity can only be formed when there are “real people, real problems, and real relationships.” Signing petitions on the Internet without any involvement in the matter at hand, may constitute a “project-oriented” solidarity, but such acts do not constitute, according to Scholz, political solidarity. This brand of solidarity, Scholz maintains, calls for positive duties that may involve such activities as: boycotts of products, active advocacy of policy changes, and lifestyle alterations involving water use or meat consumption. Feminist writer, bell hooks, captures Scholz’s understanding of active commitment to an issue when she recommends self-descriptions such as “I advocate for specific feminist issues” rather than “I am a feminist.” Political solidarity, according to Scholz, requires a resolve to act on a moral conviction rather than a passive affinity for a particular cause. For Bayertz, Camus

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9 Scholz 2008, 161
10 Bayertz 1999, 9
11 Scholz 2008, 34
12 Scholz 33
13 Bayertz 1999, 17-18
14 Scholz 2008, 37
15 Scholz 57-58
16 Scholz 2008, 51
captures the spirit of political solidarity when he argues that true change must be gained through meaningful revolt.\textsuperscript{17}

Scholz maintains that those who are not oppressed can share in a political solidarity with the oppressed.\textsuperscript{18} The danger, however, can be an “over-identification” with an experience that simply is not that of people from privileged backgrounds. Allen J. Moore (1982) expresses the same concern of trivializing a liberation perspective when one comes from a privileged North American perspective and rallies for the rights of oppressed groups within the population.\textsuperscript{19} Scholz also points out how the very nature of solidarities can shift as relationships and historical movements for social change began through political solidarity for the interests of labor and, in time, evolved into a form of social solidarity of workers both within and beyond the boundaries of Poland.\textsuperscript{20} The effort to cure AIDS began as a form of political solidarity for the rights of people with the disease, according to Scholz, but in more recent decades, with the global fund for a cure for AIDS, has become a form of international civic solidarity. Because the types of solidarities shift, there can be multiple solidarities at work in a given situation and some aspects of situations may call forth the qualities of one type of solidarity as opposed to another.

Linking its historical roots to the formation of the European Union, Scholz characterizes civic solidarity as the bonds of citizens to protect the basic needs of the most vulnerable in society through a re-distribution of resources.\textsuperscript{21} Bayertz connects this form of solidarity with the notion of the “welfare state.”\textsuperscript{22} Tracing such welfare actions to France’s Declaration of Human Rights (1793), Bayertz recalls the term, “holy duty,” as the language evoked to promote such actions towards the neediest of society. In identifying other sources of civic solidarity, Bayertz cites the work of John Rawls, whose chief criterion in evaluating whether justice is served is: the extent to which the weakest members of society benefit.\textsuperscript{23} Current examples of civic solidarity in the United States can be seen in legislative efforts by Senator Bernie Sanders and others, towards achieving universal health care.\textsuperscript{24}

Scholz understands moral commitment as being manifested primarily in political solidarity. Scholz also introduces the idea of pseudo or “parasitical solidarity,” which may best be described as sympathy, similarity, or camaraderie.\textsuperscript{25} She cautions against a conflation of these sentiments with what she deems more legitimate forms of solidarity rooted in moral conviction and positive duty. Interestingly, neither Scholz or Bayertz dwell on the sense of solidarity as virtue, proposed by Pope John Paul II (1987).

\textsuperscript{17}Bayertz 1999, 19
\textsuperscript{18}Scholz 2008, 57
\textsuperscript{20}Scholz 2008, 39
\textsuperscript{21}Scholz 27
\textsuperscript{22}Bayertz 1999, 21
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24}Scholz 2008, 27
\textsuperscript{25}Scholz 47
From the perspective of religious education, Paulo Freire (1970) unpacks this term, “solidarity” by explaining first what solidarity is not, that is “false charity.” Freire equates false charity with a patronizing attitude only serving to make the oppressed feel more helpless. A more genuine sense of generosity, a term he seems to prefer to charity, empowers people to action on their own behalf in an effort to change their status in life. False charity is a tactic of the oppressor. It should not be confused with solidarity. Many examples of acts of charity could be characterized as “handouts” that appease the guilt of the one “giving;” these, however, do not do anything to liberate the one oppressed.

Standing in the tradition of Freire, Suzanne Toton (2006) calls on religious educators to not simply cultivate awareness about poverty and injustice but to teach about the need for structural or institutional change. In *Justice Education: From Service to Solidarity*, Toton levels strong criticisms at educational endeavors aimed at simply exposing students to the poor in undeveloped countries. She argues that such consciousness-raising efforts promote good feelings among volunteers, appease the guilt of those in the developed world but do little or nothing to change the structures that perpetuate and oppression. Arguing against the whole notion of “doing service,” Toton likens such activity as a form of “false charity,” preserving the status quo and the interests of the dominant class engaged in the serving. Besides the enormous expenditure of time it involves, “service-learning,” she contends, often avoids engagement in the deeper and more significant questions such as: why does poverty and destitution exist in the first place?

Toton’s (2006) understanding of a religious education for transformation bases praxis in research, advocacy, and political action. Her argument mirrors and expands that of Michael Warren who calls religious educators committed to justice and peace to engage young people in a “politicization.” Commenting on Freire’s notion of a “semi-intransitive consciousness,” one ultimately concerned with its own survival, Warren challenges religious educators to introduce young people to the affairs of the polis. He believes that religious educators and youth ministers must confront a barrage of passivity that is inculcated in young people (though writing before the Internet), starting through television, advertising and continuing in the “hidden curriculum” of secondary and higher education. According to Warren, churches and schools often “domesticate” young people rather than “politicize” them; ensuring their passivity and reinforcing “powerlessness and voicelessness.” He admonishes congregations and schools for not soliciting the feedback of young people in making important decisions. For this reason, he advocates education about the dynamics of power and social change. Could encounter immersions promote genuine experiences of solidarity that might lead to political action for social change?

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28 Toton 2006,112
30 Warren 1987, 34.
Summary Conclusions

In reviewing the broad terrain of religious education and social ethics literature discussed thus far it is helpful to synthesize the main points of this discussion.

It bears repeating that many secondary and higher education institutions, as well as houses of worship, sponsor immersion offerings, many of which are motivated by a commitment to social justice. The goal to promote solidarity is often cited as associated with these immersions. Often the language of service, solidarity, and social justice can be somewhat jumbled in reference to these immersions. This paper calls for a clear and genuine commitment to solidarity, manifest in the multiple forms that Scholz and Bayertz explain, but taking into account key cautionary concerns that Freire, Toton and others have helped to elucidate. There can be a tendency towards a “false charity,” which only serves to make the privileged feel better about themselves but does little to change the structures that produce oppression and squalor the guilt. What are strategies that might prevent this “false charity” from encroaching into the ethos and operation of immersion experiences?

Several suggestions come to mind. First, there is much to learn from the perspectives of those who advocate and execute religious education as encounter. A focus on encounter can solidify the critical importance of dialogue to building up relationships of real commitment and solidarity. Second, there is a key dimension to the cultivation of solidarity through dialogue and shared concern. That is, the on-going nature of it all. The growth and maturation of dialogue and solidarity are processes that begin well before an immersion experience and well-after the post immersion. Genuine solidarity is not a one-stop proposition. Traveling across the world to build a water-system in a remote African village may make a huge impact on that village, radically changing education, employment opportunities, gender roles and practices, as well as the overall health and safety of a community. This service impact cannot be underestimated. At the same it is the cultivation of lasting relationships, sustained through dialogue, friendship, and commitment that will empower people of diverse backgrounds to transform and to embrace together the many injustices they face. A water system can break but relationships of sustained dialogue carry on.

This point leads to a third dimension of solidarity that is critical to the sponsorship of immersion encounters. The effort of solidarity needs to be larger than a charismatic personality or social entrepreneur who may have initiated the relationship in the first place. Solidarity is strongest when it is grounded, as Toton recommends, in an institutional commitment. When educational institutions work with community-based partners to increase literacy, lift more people out of unemployment, or provide increased opportunities for low income housing, then immersions are rooted in a meta-goal, solidarity. To the extent that houses of worship, non-profits, and higher education institutions sponsoring immersions can establish long-term economic, educational or environmental goals, for example, with networks both domestically and internationally, there seems more of a chance to grow solidarity. A cautionary note, though, remains: the efforts of solidarity should not subsume subsidiarity. In other words, solidarity initiatives through grassroots immersions should not lose the personal dynamic of dialogue and encounter or else they risk becoming bureaucratic and patronizing.
As I write this paper, delegations of helping people (armed forces, police, doctors, nurses, and everyday citizens) are heading toward hurricane-ravaged Texas and Florida. A mega effort of civic solidarity is underway in order to remove debris, provide clothing and shelter for the homeless, and food for the hungry. These acts of solidarity, grounded in direct service, are impressive and very much needed. Many questions remain, however. Will these civic solidarity missions stop in two or three weeks when people have to resume their life responsibilities? Might moral and political solidarity actions be needed to ensure that the poor, the elderly, and most vulnerable will receive the on-going funding needed to recover their livelihoods? The burgeoning of social media in the past decade highlights the social solidarity that people extend to others especially in these natural disasters. But unless these expressions of concern and affinity give way to resolve and action steps they could simply become mere sentimentality or pseudo-solidarity.

The year 2017 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication by Pope Paul VI (1967), “On the Development of Peoples.” In 1967, the profound needs of the world’s poor are foremost in his mind after immersing himself in Latin America, Africa, and India and he declares quite emphatically that “the world is sick.”31 Paul VI call for a “solidarity in action.”32 Regarding economic development as the solution to the world’s destructive poverty, Paul VI emphasizes, “that there can be no progress toward complete development of man without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity.”33 In other words, development must be more than an economic phenomenon for select super powers. Social, spiritual, cultural, and educational development are all needed to give birth to what Paul VI calls, “authentic integral development.”34 Such a holistic vision of development was inspired by Paul VI through his direct encounter with the poorest of the poor. To cultivate and sustain this understanding of development, a rigorous commitment to dialogue and solidarity is needed. Educators and ministers seeking to emulate this commitment to the poor through the sponsorship of strategic immersion encounters would do well to name solidarity as fundamental.

References


32 Pope Paul VI 1
33 Pope Paul VI 43
34 Pope Paul VI 14


