Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality – inspiring to go ‘beyond’
Ina ter Avest, contribution to collaborative session, REA 2018

Introduction
Once I was invited for a meeting at one of my Turkish colleagues home. However, before we could start the meeting (some very urgent points had to be discussed) we were asked to share some thoughts in an informal way. This informal part of the meeting was accompanied with some food. Eh, some food …??? My colleague’s wife had prepared a pile of lovely food: home baked bread, soups, salads, tomatoes, sweet peppers and cookies and cakes, fruit and curds for sweet as a desert. This all to create a good and relaxed climat for the harsh discussions that had to follow. I felt somewhat irritated, knowing that this informal part would take much time, time at the expense of the time needed for the discussions and decisions to be taken during the formal part. Beyond Dutch white normativity I walked the path and went ‘beyond’. We had a lovely lunch, with inspiring conversations, and took unanimous the right, fair decisions during the formal part of our meeting. How can we teach and learn walking the path of ‘beyond’? In this contribution and with the help of Hannah Arendt en Dorothee Sölle I arrive at the concept of Normative Interreligious Leadership Consultation, a possible way to go ‘beyond’ – as a person becoming a leader in ‘something surprisingly new’.

1. Arendt’s natality – the start of ‘something surprisingly new’
In her inspiring work ‘Vita Activa’ Hannah Arendt specifies the concept of natality (Arendt 2004, p. 173-190). Natality is the potency of a new beginning with every new baby that is born, every newcomer. Every child enters the world as a highly receptive being (Oosterwegel …., p. 106). Being receptive is a very important characteristic of every newborn baby to get to know this world and to turn it into her/his world. Together with the child’s being receptive, preconditional is a context/a parent/an educator that allows the child to enter the world, who invites the child, to make the world accesible and enable the child to make her/his appearance in the world. Making the world accesible also requires an attitude of hospitality. Natality for the educators means that ‘we immerse ourselves into the world at first through the good will and solidarity of those who nurture us’ (Oosterwegel, 2016, p. xx) and later as the child grows up through the own deeds and words.
Arendt extends her ideas about natality to the position of leaders. A leader can change a situation due to her/his own way of reframing the situation from ‘Things cannot go on like this’ to ‘I cannot go on like this.’ Her/his power then is no longer related to the hierarchical position, but to the risk s/he dares to take – independent of whether or not the initiative ever can/will be realised (Arendt 2004, p. 188). The statement ‘I cannot go on like this’ shows that a person takes responsibility for her/his ‘rebirth’.

In what way can Arendt’s thought on natality help us in our thinking about ‘beyond white normativity’, becoming ‘leaders’ going ‘beyond white normativity’? Does ‘beyond’ find its foundation in ‘respect’ for the other? Arendt states: “respect is a kind of ‘friendship’ without intimacy and closeness; it is a regard for the person from a distance”. Friendship for Arendt means an ongoing dialogue with the other who is different from me (De Kesel, 2008, pp. 71 ff). For whom can we be (come) a ‘friend’ in the Arendt-ian sense? I interpret Arendtian friendship as characterized by: surfing flexibly on the waves of empathy of being close to standing aloof. No way for engangement; strong need for disentanglement. An articulated interpretation of the meaning of the word ‘respect’ may help us. Respect comes from the latin verb ‘respicere’, that is: to look conscientiously at something, to consider something thoroughly, and to care or to provide for something. Distance is needed for a respectful attitude, and at the same time a genuine interest in something or someone. An association comes to my mind of ‘being a good neighbour’, as this is worded in the English sayings of ‘good fences make good neighbours’ and ‘love your neighbour, yet pull not down your fence’.

From a perspective of the need for disentanglement the different ways in which we ourselves are involved in ‘white normativity’ need to be analysed. We ourselves have to be willing to ‘surfing flexibly on the waves of empathy of being close to standing aloof’. To allow ourselves and to enable others to start ‘something new’ and ‘beyond’, context analysis is necessary. In addition to that initiatives for workshops are needed for external dialogues (with others, equals, biblical texts) and internal dialogue (thinking) problematizing the issue(s) that urge the start of ‘something new’. Dorothee Sölle’s ecological spirituality offers an inspirational foundation for such a dialogue.

2. Sölle’s ecospirituality – ‘down to earth’ spirituality
In the Christian tradition the German theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929-2003) developed what is coined as 'eco-spirituality'. Taking the journey as an age old metaphor for the experiences of the soul on its way to deep understanding of the self, Sölle invites the reader in her publication, ‘Die Hinreise’ (The Inward Journey; 1975) to break the outward journey into the world and the responsibilities that go with being in the world. In her view people should create space for a stop over for an inward journey; a stop over in meditation on religious narratives strengthening the soul, and subsequently permeating every day life. People, according to Sölle, during their life time journey can not live on bread only, that would result in their death. In her interpretation 'bread only' refers to a structural lack of community that goes with anxiety, rivalry, loneliness. 'Bread only' is a composition of violence and misunderstandings. It is the conviction of Sölle that it is the focus on combatting these phenomena that causes people’s death, in a metaphorical sense. „The world is a supermarket and a industry of ,bread only’ and for ,bread only’. That’s how we die every day again a terrible death“ (Sölle, 1975, p. 11). ‘Death’ in biblical narratives is understood in a metaphorical way, pointing to situations in which inhumanity and injustice reign, according to Sölle. In the Christian tradition the announcement of the victory over ‘death’, according to Sölle, not only starts at the resurrection of Jesus but is present in each and every parable and story of his life. „The world is the stage of ongoing resurrection“, according to Sölle (in Van den Dool, 2017, p. 88). The narratives in the Gospels, as well as the narrations in the Hebrew bible, touch upon existential experiences of wonder, suffering and injustice; as such equalling what is called ‘disruptive moments’ (Ter Avest, 2014) – moments of perplexity, putting a person off his/her stroke. These moments occur for example when a friendship is suddenly and unexpectedly on edge, in case of being fired o rat the death of a beloved person. Such disruptive moments can be induced as part of a teaching and learning process. In dialogue with the narratives in Holy Scriptures people are encouraged to have faith and share their positive and negative feelings and feelings of doubt. Identification with narratives’ protagonist and/or opponent facilitate people to lay bare their soul and express their sorrow but also to celebrate life. Such experiences and feelings are in need for language as this is given in poetic sights, in songs and in prayers; anyway, words that transcend the language that provides information about mere facts and describes logical relations between given facts. Religious traditions provide for a language to stand the challenges of life, according to Sölle (Sölle, 1976, p. 30; see also Sölle 1984).
Sölle’s understanding of religion bears great resemblance with the description given by Paul Tillich as, the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of a meaning of our life (Tillich, 1957, I). Such a ‘state of being’ cannot but having consequences for daily life, according to Sölle. Her theological line of thought is firmly socially engaged and has an explicit spiritual perspective. It suggests that we encounter the transcendent particularly in everyday reality, i.e. in fighting for a more just world (Van den Dool, 2017, p.58). This relationship of socially engagement by Angela Roothaan (2007) is explicitly named as a spiritual attitude. According to Roothaan spirituality concerns a person’s whole attitude to life, her/his orientation in life keeping to the middle between experience and action (Roothaan, 2007, p.43ff.). A spiritual life orientation takes as its starting point the revitalizing power of a person’s context – in our case the revitalizing power of a religious tradition as part of a person’s cultural context.

Sölle’s spirituality and its relation to ‘disruptive moments’ in life is characterized by three aspects, that is cultural criticism, self-criticism and personal transformation (Van den Dool, 2017, p.93). Her hermeneutical praxis is a reading practice of „double contextualization: the context of the reader is brought into dialogue with the context of persons from biblical texts.“ (ibid., p.105). An analysis of the socio-cultural situation, and a person’s positioning in this context, in dialogue with texts from Holy Scriptures awakens a hunger for change and liberation of ‘death’ provoking circumstances. According to Sölle this is a spiritual journey, a journey inward strengthening the journey outward and take responsibilities in everyday life. A journey in needs workshops as ‘stop overs’ as a safe space facilitating external dialogues (with others, equals, biblical texts) and internal dialogue (thinking) problematizing the issue(s) that urge the start of ‘something new’. In the section below we offer Narrative Interreligious Leadership Consultation (NILCo) as a promising ‘stop over’.

### 3. Narrative Interreligious Leadership Consultation (NILCo)

The model of ‘Narrative Interreligious Leadership Consultation’ (NILCo) – inspired by Van den Dool’s PhD-thesis (Van den Dool 2017) - starts with an inventory of issues that keep a person busy (step 1). The focus is on concrete situations, ‘critical incidents’, related to inclusion-exclusion. With the help of the interviewer, the responses of the interviewees are summarized in so-called valuations: short statements representing the core of the response. Then (step 2) the person is invited to relate each single valuation to a list of validated affects (like tenderness,
loneliness, care, anger). From this a pattern emerges giving insight in a theme connecting concrete issues that worry the interviewee. This results in a feeling of ‘Things cannot go on like this!’, followed by the awareness ‘I cannot go on like this!’ The next step (step 3) is to empower the person by bringing vividly into mind moving moments, situations in which the person showed her/his strength to change an unwanted situation, related to her/his theme that keeps her/him busy. In step 4 one of these powerful situations (in SCM-terminology: one of these valuations) is selected to reflected upon in depth, because “we assume that this occasion, action or experience has taken the participant to some degree beyond the borders of human existence, as if he has gotten a glimpse from another side; from a ‘beyond’ to some degree” (Van den Dool 2017, p. 141). This reflection is in step 5 deepened by way of a mirroring tekst, that is placed next to the selected valuation of step 4. This text is expected to challenge the interviewee to leave her/his comfort zone - a rebirth. This natality and – the motivation and inspiration for change strengthened – is the start the innovative action. Repetition of this kind of reflective processes – on an individual and on a group level - on recurring moments during the year results in an entirety of insights of potential actions to bring into practice innovations in situations characterized as ‘Things cannot go on like this!’ This ‘entirety of insights’ is coined as ‘moresprudence’ (see also Wirtz, 2004; see also Stolper et al, 2016). Moresprudence acts as a point of orientation for future decisions – life orientation on a personal and organizational identity on a group level.

For this ‘moresprudence’ a coaching style of invitation and care is needed, which I bring together in the concept of ‘provocative guidance’. The concept ‘provocative’ can be read as a hyphenated concept, consisting of the Latin ‘provocare’ which means challenging and ‘care’ – the same care that is included in the concept of respect, as we have shown above. Central in NILCo is the dialogue with religious and secular texts dedicated to similar paradoxical situations as the person or the group meets in every day life. Such a dialogue is in need of empathy - whether developed to a certain extend, of developing through the dialogue. Empathy as more than mere sympathy; ‘only when you are prepared to connect your self with the other, and turn this connection into a relationship of attachment – with real persons or with characters in a narrative - only then they will tell you something you did not know yet and you will open up for change’ (Otten, 2018, p. 9; translation of the author).
A dialogue with the potency to facilitate becoming a courageous person going ‘beyond’ by deepening the motivations and motives to go ‘beyond’. NILCo is a promising way – a way to go ‘beyond’ exclusion and expulsion; a way characterized by togetherness. Nevertheless: a long way to go.

References:


