Commemoration of Pille Valk

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University of Hamburg

REDCo consortium:
University of Hamburg [D]
in cooperation with the
University of Warwick [GB]
EPHE Sorbonne Paris [F]
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam [NL]
University of Stavanger [NOR]
University of Tartu [EST]
University of Muenster [D]
Russian Christian Academy for Humanities in St. Petersburg [RUS]
University of Granada [E]
**Wolfram Weisse**

### Introduction

Today, we turn our thoughts to our dear colleague and friend Pille Valk. She was the driving force behind religious education in Estonia, she played an important role in the international discourse on religious education, and she was a highly valued member of a large number of international organisations such as ISREV, ENRECA and REDCo.

Today we remember her as member of our REDCo project. Pille was an active project leader and she stood out especially for her leading role in the quantitative survey on religion, dialogue, conflict and religious education in our eight REDCo countries. This task was one of the toughest in our research programme.

Pille regularly led our thinking on the basic assumptions and core questions of our quantitative research through all phases from planning, piloting and finalising the quantitative questionnaire, through analysing the results and finally coordinating their publication. All of us are aware of the complex and difficult path we had to travel, Pille especially was outstanding with that part of our research.

You and I remember some critical discussions and situations within this stretch of our REDCo activities. I enjoyed her confidence and friendship, as she approached me several times in such crucial situations, and I am not sure I really could give her good advice except to encourage her and propose taking more time for the research process, if necessary. Did we support Pille enough? I hope that we did.

Nobody thought she would die so quickly – with the exception of Pille herself. She had been aware of her health situation – and at the same time she comforted us in her mails writing that she could deal well with the worsening situation supported by her faith, her family, and her friends. And with the help of the angels, she wished us so often that we might feel that support also now in remembering Pille.
Olga Schihalejev

Pille in our memories

I have collected memories from my heart and your letters and combined these with photos about her to help us commemorate Pille, our beloved colleague and the leading figure of religious education in Estonia.

Pille had passion for many things: religious education, theology, history, art. She was a precise researcher and an inspiring lecturer, a supportive colleague, and a delightful, balanced and candid person who will remain in the hearts of many colleagues and students, not only in Estonia but also in Europe and internationally.

Sometimes Pille told about key events which had a huge impact on the way she lived and thought. The first of these things was a loving family. Pille was born and grew up in the rural county of Viljandi. For a long period she was the only child in the family and used to travel a lot with her parents and other relatives in Estonia as well as all over the huge territory of the USSR.

The class in which she studied was so rebellious and known for misbehaviour that parents were asked to take turns sitting on the back benches. At the age of 16 she left her hometown and studied in Nõo Upper Secondary School, which was a highly selective school for students talented in Mathematics.

Her interest and love for history, arts and education was shaped in the History department at Tartu University.

She studied a history course which was regarded by the authorities as a rather scandalous course in the period of stagnation in the early 1980s. The students were persecuted by the KGB, and several were forced out from the university, as they wrote Estonian history from another perspective to the ‘official’ history. Among her course mates were the later prime minister Mart Laar, Lauri Vahbre and many others who are now influential politicians in the independent Estonia. During her studies she married and three wonderful children were born.

At the doctoral level she continued studies at theological faculties of Tartu and Helsinki. Her professional life ranged from being a school teacher to being a teacher educator and academic researcher. Pille contributed to many international academic organisations.

Pille’s research focused on religious education. Her master’s thesis dealt with the history of RE in pre-war Estonia and her doctoral thesis with the current situation. The contextual approach she employed has been influential beyond the country’s borders. For the last three years Pille led the Estonian REDCo Project and co-ordinated REDCo’s quantitative research. In this complex role, all were impressed by her capacity to resolve differences and to bring people together to achieve demanding goals.

Pille Valk was an author of two books, more than 50 academic articles and was the editor of five books on religious or values education.

Religion was not only an academic interest for her but had a personal relevance as she was involved in several church activities. Pille was able to cope with a huge number of different tasks and her colleagues were always impressed by her productivity.

But most of all, she had wonderful personal qualities. She was able to tell stories that touched people deeply; to notice, bring out and to admire qualities in her colleagues,
students and even opponents; she was able to make space for differences, and, when necessary, to forgive. She was able to stay cheerful, supportive and thankful, in spite of her severe illness, until the very end. She said just before she died: ‘There is only love and thankfulness left in my heart’.

She always had a warm wish at the end of her e-mails, much appreciated by her REDCo friends and by others -- ‘Angels!’ Let these numerous angels be with her. We are thankful for the privilege of being her fellow travellers for a while.
Dear colleagues and friends,

John Taylor wrote in 1972 in his book *The Go-Between God*:

“The Holy Spirit is first and foremost Lord of all life, never narrowly concerned with religion, touching all of us without exception, making us aware and awake and alive. The Spirit is the anonymous spark of recognition, the current of communion, of union, nodding to us, beckoning, demanding our attention, the invisible and eternal go-between” (p. xv).

“All faith in God is basically a way of ‘seeing the ordinary’ in the light of certain moments of disclosure which have been the gift of the Holy Spirit” (p. 20–21).

It is this Spirit we have seen concretized and come alive in the life of our esteemed and beloved colleague and friend Pille Valk. Her intense and authentic commitment to and strong belief for the well-being of the other person was articulated and embodied in her often repeated prayer in her letters and emails: “Let angels watch over you”.

As an academic Pille’s excellent scholarship in history and the history of religious education was firmly grounded in an intense interest in the lives of people living today. From this she developed a gentle stance towards people with different views and practices. And in Estonia she fought for and genuine place of religious education in the school curriculum and was an important spokeswomaein the public domain in her country.

As a colleague most of us met her intensively during the last three years in the REDCo project. She was gentle but decisive, cooperative, responsible and participative, but also able and willing to share responsibility. She lived the credo: ‘never me, but we’.

Last but not least I remember her as a gifted spiritual, warm, fine and hospitable person with calm yet intense and emphatic radiation.

For me - and I guess for all of us - Pille Valk was a great gift of the Holy Spirit of God because that Spirit could manifest her/himself as an in-between between Pille and the persons she encountered.

Blessed be her name!
Bob Jackson
Pille Valk –
Some Memories

I first met Pille Valk in Christiansand in Norway in 2002 at the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV). We sat together in the bus on the way to the lovely boat trip along the coast through the offshore islands. I had not met anyone from Estonia before, and I was treated to an absorbing account of Estonian independence, just 11 years previously, and of the newly found free expression of Estonian culture and language. This was a fascinating story to hear, and it was a privilege to hear it told with such authority.

A powerful part of the story was to hear about Pille’s children, two of whom are folk musicians, reviving and expanding Estonian folk music, an important marker of national identity and pride. Pille told me that her son Toomas is a well-known Estonian folk musician. He plays music inspired by the very special area of Estonia, Setu, which has a culture rooted both in Estonian and Russian folk traditions.

He plays the karmoshka, a Russian instrument which is a hybrid between an accordion and a concertina, and he was a founder member of the famous group Vägglased. Pille’s elder daughter Katrin is an excellent folk singer, and she also plays several instruments. She is deeply committed to ecological living, and moved, with her husband and newborn baby, into a simple home in a forest, without water and electricity, and with an unpaved floor. We all know that Pille often spoke and wrote of angels! Of course, angels are messengers; Pille’s children are some of her ‘angels’, broadcasting her values to the wider world.

Pille and I also spent an evening together at the ISREV conference cabaret, sipping some duty-free whisky hidden in a mineral water bottle (a great bonding activity!) while listening to a very funny sketch about how many Norwegians it takes to change a lightbulb!

We then met the following year in Schönb erg, near Frankfurt, at the European Network for Religious Education through Contextual Approaches (ENRECA) conference in March. By day we discussed the relevance of empirical research methods for religious education practice. But in the evening we talked and sang and enjoyed each other’s company. It was at this time that I became aware of Pille’s love of sacred buildings and religious art – something about which she was highly knowledgeable. We each sang a song from our own country so, of course, Pille sang an Estonian song. We were both amused by the song from the French member of the group, who came from Strasbourg. This told of how Strasbourg used to be in France, then in Germany, then in France again, then in Germany again and so on!

Our next meeting was in October 2005 in Berlin where we both spoke at the conference of the Inter-European Commission on Church and School. Pille was a key member of ICCS. She gave an excellent, powerful paper on her research, once again raising the

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1 For a picture of Toomas (he is the one in the middle) see http://viewmorepics.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=viewImage&friendID=312812124&albumID=326415&imageID=239

2 An example of Katrin singing (in this case with the group Krää) can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo1D0kVNyU7g. My thanks go to Olga for providing me with the weblinks concerning Pille’s children.
profile of Estonia, and making other Europeans aware of the distinctiveness of that country and the issues and difficulties surrounding religious education there. She asked me to listen to her English and to correct anything that might be not quite right. The one suggestion I made was that she might consider saying ‘per cent’ rather than ‘pro cent’. She said she would change this, and then continued to say ‘pro cent’ until I last heard her speak in November 2008! I’m really glad she did, because it was so charming, and one of Pille’s trademarks!

Then it was a great joy to come together again in the REDCo Project, firstly just a month later, in a chilly Hamburg (December 2005) and in Hamburg again the following March, formally to launch the project. I was so delighted that Estonia was included as part of our European partnership.

On the heels of our conference in Granada, came the REDCo meeting in Pille’s home city of Tartu, in October 2006. Here, Pille was in her element! She was so proud of the city and of the University and we heard so much more about Pille and her family. She spoke beautifully at the university’s reception for members of REDCo, and it was delightful to see Pille on her home territory. She also gave us a wonderful introduction to the history of the university, speaking in the impressive great hall.

She also revealed a new skill – that of tour guide – taking us on a marvellous walking tour of the city. Among many key places and objects, she introduced us to a most interesting sculpture of the Irish author Oscar Wilde and the Estonian writer Eduard Vilde. The sculpture pictures an imaginary conversation between the two similarly named authors, which would have taken place around 1892. Between the two writers is a bench where you can sit and look up at each of the conversationalists in turn. One of my favourite photographs is of Pille, sitting and smiling on the bench between the two Wildes!

I also remember a rather unusual anecdote in which Pille told me that she had had a female dog that had suckled the family’s pet cat. This she regarded as a symbol of reconciliation! This was an important concept for Pille; she herself was a reconciler. During our intensive project, with its tight deadlines and ambitious publishing programme, she poured oil upon troubled waters on more than one occasion. Needless to say, REDCo’s visit to Tartu remains a very happy memory for me. It was the one time I saw Pille in her own Estonian context, and that was a great privilege.

Of course, we continued to meet at REDCo conferences and to stay in contact by e-mail. We met in the great city of St Petersburg in September 2007 and met no less than five times in 2008. First we met in Amsterdam, and then in Stavanger, in May, where Pille’s coordination of the quantitative study of European young people was a major feature. She had recently heard that she had not

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3 Pille was proud that Olga continues to keep the debate about religious education in the public gaze in Estonia, and would have been so thrilled that Olga’s thesis is to be published as a REDCo book in the series Religious Diversity and Education in Europe, making Estonia’s story widely available.

4 Incidentally, I recently put ‘dog suckles cat’ into Google. Pille would have been highly amused that 130,000 hits were recorded!
been promoted to a full professorship. She carried this disappointment with great fortitude, but it was a really negative experience for her and many of us felt that she deserved much more recognition. Then we met at the wonderful REDCo meeting in Paris, and in Berlin once again, at a major European conference of ICCS.

Our last face-to-face meeting was at the University of Warwick in November 2008. Pille gave a really excellent, authoritative presentation at the very well attended public event and was on fine form. We have a couple of wonderful photographs of the National coordinators of REDCo from this day, and Pille looks so well and happy and strong.

However, her illness gradually took its toll, and her health began to fail. She faced difficult treatments with courage, optimism and faith. All of her communications were so positive, right to the end. I know that she received tremendous support from her family and from her colleagues, and I know that, from our group, Olga was a great source of love and support.

Pille’s last e-mail to me includes the following words:

_Dear Bob_

_Cordial greetings from Tartu!_

_I really appreciate your support and tutoring regarding Olga’s PhD. Thank you so much for this._

_Thank you also for keeping me in your mind…_

_Angels to be with you and your dears!_

_Pille_

And may angels be with you, dear Pille – to Eternity.
We think of Pille and we are aware that we all have to die as she did so early, too early.

We are grateful to have been friends and colleagues of Pille.

We remember her very well. Being aware of the boundaries of life, we are even more thankful for the gift of cooperation and friendship that we enjoyed with her and that we still enjoy.

Our cooperation in our research work has created a growing friendship in our whole group. And friendship is the central gift that has inspired us and that supports us.

So let us stand up in memory of Pille, let us join hands, let us look back in gratitude at Pille and let us be aware that friendship more than anything else is the basis of a truly living community, both in the academic field and in the personal sphere.

Let us be thankful and end with three minutes of silence in contemplation.