Traversing Boundaries: Dialogues on Christian Privilege, Religious Oppression, and Religious Pluralism among Believers and Non-Believers

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A dialogic model for the discussion of issues related to Christian privilege and religious oppression of minority religious groups and non-believers in the United States is presented. The goal of the dialogue circles is to create and maintain a true multicultural community on the university campus.

One of our responsibilities as members of a teacher education faculty is to teach the required multicultural course. Within the discussions in our classrooms we have witnessed various levels of resistance to the concept of "privilege". Part of that resistance is manifested around issues related to Christian privilege. Religious scholar Diana Eck (2001) summarizes the multicultural "dilemma" created by Christian privilege:

> The new American dilemma is real religious pluralism, and it poses challenges to America's Christian churches that are as difficult and divisive as those of race. Today, the invocation of a Christian America takes on a new set of tensions as our population of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist neighbors grows. The ideal of a Christian America stands in contradiction to the spirit, if not the letter, of America's foundational principle of religious freedom (p. 46).

Based on Peggy McIntosh's (1988) pioneering investigations of White and male privilege, we can, by analogy, understand Christian privilege as constituting a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits afforded to Christians. This system of benefits confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faiths as well as non-believers. These systemic inequities are pervasive throughout society. They are encoded into the individual's consciousness and woven into the very fabric of our social institutions (Bell, 1997; Miller, 1976). Schlosser (2003) enumerates fifty privileges, organized into eight categories afforded to Christians in the United States.

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On college campuses, to create and maintain a true multicultural community, it is necessary to expand the demographic make-up of the constituents in a number of categories, including religion. This must include members of different religious denominations as well as non-believers, and these multiple perspectives must be incorporated throughout curriculum. If members of the campus community are not interacting with others different from themselves, much of the potential for the development of a true sense of community is lost. As a way to open the dialogue about Christian privilege and religious oppression we have designed a campus-wide process that positions these topics with other multicultural endeavors in the higher education community.

A Dialogic Model

We propose a dialogic model for the discussion of issues related to Christian privilege and religious oppression of minority religious groups and non-believers in the United States. Throughout our model, we deploy as our theoretical framework four conceptual organizers: the six assumptions of Watt's (2007) Privileged Identity Exploration Model (PIE), and the four stages in the dialogue model of Zuniga, Nagda, and Sevig (2000). In addition, we use Robert Kegan's (1982) three-part method of bringing students to a new level of awareness helping them to "unlearn" prior misinformation or knowledge that inhibits personal or academic growth. Finally, we use the Group Development Model (Fay & Doyle, 1982) in our religious dialogues.

The major goals of intergroup dialogues are to engage members of different groups in an educational process that encourages conversation, inquiry, conflict exploration and resolution with the goal of finding common ground and building alliances in the context of social systems of privilege and oppression (Zuniga, Nagda & Sevig, 2000). Watt (in this issue) outlines a number of assumptions to consider when discussing issues of social oppression and social privilege. Within our dialogue circles on religion and religious privilege, we have considered ways to provide participants an opportunity to develop an increased awareness of themselves as individuals and as members of a social group. They can learn more about their own and other cultures, histories, and experiences, learn to question prior misinformation, stereotypes, and biases, and identify actions that contribute to the creation of socially just communities (Zuniga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2000).

Openness to change is neither easy nor comfortable, and participants' defensive behaviors may, at first, be extensive. It is not our goal to challenge beliefs as "right" or "wrong." Instead, through our dialogue circles, participants share their experiences, and we provide the space to explore their issues of privilege and/or oppression within societal, institutional, and individual levels.

Thus, privilege exploration is considered an on-going process as identified by Watt (2007).

The primary model of dialogue we have chosen for our dialogue circle was developed by Zuniga, Nagda, and Sevig (2000). Within this four-stage foundational model, we have designed a number of activities that fit within our focus of inter-religious and non-believers dialogue.

In designing the institution-wide program, we realize that affecting real change requires that we work across differences, and that we help facilitate a process in which participants become true learners, equipped to initiate change in themselves and others. This cannot be accomplished in a one-time workshop with a series of strangers who come and go. It is best done in a dialogic process within a cohort structure. A cohort of varying ages, backgrounds, and institutional ranking will be formed each time the circles are begun on campus. In keeping with the cohort model, each group remains together throughout all of the dialogue circles. Through this design, individuals can experience others in the group and engage in dialogue at a meaningful and trusting level. Each time the dialogue circles are begun, a new cohort will be chosen. Therefore, at any given time on campus, there may be several different cohorts taking part in dialogues at any one of the four stages of the dialogue model. It is necessary, therefore, that multiple facilitators be trained so that many groups can be run simultaneously. We think it best if facilitators are made up of a combination of one faculty/staff person and one student.

Stage One: Group Beginnings

Utilizing the Group Development Model's Forming Stage (Fay & Doyle, 1982) and Kegan's (1982) Confirmation Stage, the first stage of the dialogue circle concentrates on building relationships through the development of group guidelines, suggested activities, readings, and assignments to create a welcoming environment for a constructive dialogue. This can be done in a variety of configurations including dyads, triads, large and small groups, circles, and panels.

Dialogue Circle: Getting Started. We ask participants to write their answer to the following question: When you read the title and description of this dialogue circle, and when you enrolled, what expectations did you have? What would you like to get out of this experience? We ask the participants to share their responses and we write these on the board or on newsprint sheets for all to view. Then, we list facilitator's objectives for the group as a way of finalizing the full design of the dialogue circles:

1. To learn more about our own and other individual's and group's religious or non-religious cultures and histories
2. To create an understanding of social justice and multicultural issues around the topics of religion, religious pluralism, and religious oppression
3. To enhance intragroup and intergroup collaboration and dialogue
4. To form and strengthen inter-faith coalitions and alliances
5. To have fun

Dialogue Circle Guidelines. To ensure a cooperative environment, we suggest that facilitator's establish guidelines such as rules about anonymity and confidential sharing within the group, being open to all questions or opinions shared, and being an active and respectful listener. The guidelines above and others established within each group emphasize the notion that dialogue is not the same as debate. Unlike a debate where there are winners and losers and participants compete to prove a point or defend a position, in a dialogue participants share experiences, engage in active listening to discover and learn about the experiences of others both within and across identity groupings, and explore new ways of joining in coalition to bring about social equality. In this sense, the purpose of intergroup dialogue is not necessarily to reach consensus among participants (Zuniga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2000).

Dialogue Circle Agenda. At the beginning of each session, we display the agenda for that session to inform participants what is planned.

Weekly Journaling. Throughout the series of dialogues, we encourage participants to write reflection papers giving personal reflections, responses, and analysis of discussion, readings, videos, or experiences that relate to the dialogue. Every week, facilitators collect them, read them, respond, and return them to the authors. Examples of general questions for participants to consider when writing their personal reflections include:

1. Describe some of your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the session.
2. What part(s) of the session had the greatest impact on you? Why?
3. What in the reading(s) or class discussion was particularly interesting, what surprised you, or what was new information to you?

It is through the structured activities of Stage One that we are able to meet learners where they are and are able to listen to them and to legitimize their beliefs without judgment, guilt, or blame (Kegan, 1982).

Stage Two: Learning About Commonalities, Differences, and Sources of Intergroup Conflict

In the second stage of the dialogue circle, we concentrate on increasing opportunities for engagement and development by locating individual and intergroup experiences within a larger societal context of systems of religious oppression, religious privilege, domination, and subordination in the United States (Zuniga, Nagda&Sevig, 2000). Participants reflect on and share memories of early socialization, and they examine critical incidents around issues of religion in their upbringing. They begin to understand their own and others' religious experiences, and recognize similarities and differences as well as potential sources of conflict.

In Stage Two, we earnestly begin to stretch students' existing views by reframing topics through new information or a new perspective (Kegan's 1982, "Contradiction" stage). We solicit alternative views from others, draw out contradictions, and provide an opportunity for exchange (Kegan, 1982). During this "Storming" stage (Fay & Doyle, 1982), the "reality" that dialogue is often a challenging process can enter, and participants can become frustrated with the group experience. Inappropriate individual or group behaviors may begin to set in, and the facilitators must constantly work to maintain open communication, support participation, and clarify, redefine, and identify the next steps in the process.

Religious/Non-Religious Self-Assessment Activity. To better assess the religious/spiritual/non-religious backgrounds of the participants, we include a self assessment at this stage. This can be done individually or within the group.

Introduction to Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression. In stage two of the dialogue circles, the facilitators introduce the issue of Christian privilege and religious oppression in the United States. We define terms and assign readings for participants.

Suggested Readings for Participants at Stage Two

1. Clark, C., Vargas, M. B., Schlosser, L. Z., & Alimo, C. (2002). Diversity initiatives in higher Education: It's not just "Secret Santa" in December: Addressing educational and workplace climate issues linked to Christian Privilege. [Electronic version]. *Multicultural Education, 10*(2), 52-57.
2. Schlosser, L. Z. (2003). Christian privilege: Breaking a sacred taboo. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 31*(1), 44-51.

Stage Three: Working with Intergroup Issues and Conflicts

In Stage Three, participants explore issues of conflict to discern and appreciate the connections between individual experiences and social group membership with historical, political, societal, economic, and institutional forces. They are encouraged to identify and critically evaluate the advantages and benefits (privileges), as well as the disadvantages and costs of their particular social (religious) group membership. Facilitators encourage participants' exploration at three interrelated levels: cognitive, behavioral, and affective (Zuniga, Nagda&Sevig, 2000).

While the defense mechanisms developed by Watt (2007) can be identified throughout the first two stages of the dialogue circles, it is during this third stage that they become most prevalent. As participants struggle with their privilege, and as we discuss the "hot topics" associated with Christian Privilege in our society, defense mechanisms are often employed to ease the discomfort. By naming the defense mechanisms, we are able, as a group, to dissect them and take away their power. We can see them for what they are as instruments to sustain the status quo. Use of the defense mechanisms, therefore, can seem quite innocuous until they are identified. As the defense mechanisms are identified, participants can understand how prevalent, and resultantly invisible, Christian privilege has become in our institutions. As examples of the defense mechanisms as outlined in PIE model (Watt, 2007), we offer the following quotes from students in our classes. The students see their comments as rational justifications, rather than defense reactions.

Denial - "It's not Christian, it's American." This student experienced her privilege so completely as to define "American" as "Christian", denying the reality of a religiously mixed society.

Deflection - "They can't expect the dominant culture to change. If someone is going to live in America, then they need to understand that we are a Christian country, and the majority rules." The student making this statement deflected his privilege by arguing that those who adhere to something other than a Christian faith must simply "put up" with the "way things are here."

Rationalization - "Christmas is a secular holiday where everyone gets into the commercialization of the holiday. We need something to brighten the dark days of winter; I don't see how a few lights on my door hurt anyone." The faculty member who uttered this statement chose to ignore the patently religious nature of the Christian holiday in an attempt to convince himself that everyone could, rightfully, enjoy a "winter holiday."

Intellectualization - "Everyone believes in something divine. Christianity is just one of the ways we seek meaning in our lives." This was offered as an explanation for Christian hegemony in the United States by ignoring those who don't believe in divinity.

Principium - "As I see it, there is only one way into heaven and that is through Jesus Christ. I want to give that gift of eternal life to anyone I can." This student's goal was to focus only on her perceived benefit and extend that to others, failing to acknowledge others' choices of differing or non-belief.

False Envy - "It's Christians who are the victims here. Our values are under attack, not theirs." Several students agreed with this statement that deflects the reality of Christian hegemony. Privilege is ignored under the auspices of defending one's faith against the perceived attacks of others.

Minimization - "They all have the same chances to practice their religion as I do. They can hang a Menorah at Christmas if they want. After all, it's Hanukkah and Kwanza, right?" Again, a widely held opinion, this statement fails to understand the prevalence of Christian hegemony and the effect it has on those who are non-believers or practice a different religions.

Benevolence - "We need to welcome non-believers. After all, they are God's creation, too." The perceived benevolence behind this statement is contradicted by a perception of those beliefs as deficient.

Suggested Readings for Participants at Stage Three

1. Blumenfeld, W. J. (2006). Christian privilege and the promotion of "secular" and not-so "secular" mainline Christianity in public schooling and in the larger society. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 39*(3).

Hot Topics. Participants can list topics that are currently of interest. Beginning a dialogue circle close to the Christian holidays of Christmas or Easter can feed a hot topic. While it is best to avoid beginning a group around these times, it is around significant Christian holidays that resistance and sensitivities on all sides are at the highest. It will, however, provide good discussion for groups that have already been in process for a time. As the participants are exposed to more contradiction, it is necessary for facilitators to continue to give positive feedback while offering praise for the participants' continued engagement in the process (Kegan, 1982). It is through the structured activities of Stage Three that participants can consider the fear and extreme discomfort that comes with recognition of oppression and their role in it.

Stage Four: Alliance Building and Social Action

The final stage readies participants for closure of the dialogue circles by redirecting the dialogue focus from conflict examination, inquiry, and analysis into action planning and coalition building. Participants investigate such questions as: Where do we go from here? What kind of work do we need to do within our own identity group? What kind of work can we do in collaboration with members of the other group(s) in dialogue? (Zuniga, Nagda, Sevig, 2000). The group focuses on group closure with activities that encourages participants to verbally express how other group members have been instrumental in the co-learning process.

Conclusion

It is our hope that through implementing dialogue circles described here on campuses, institutions can take a first step in working toward redressing the impact of injustice, destructive conflicts, and demeaning relationships. Addressing the privilege afforded by religion is just one way to accomplish this goal.

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