

Challenges of Cultivating Religious and Political Tolerance in Institutions of Higher Learning

Gift Rupande

Senior lecturer
Faculty of Applied Social Science
Zimbabwe Open University
The student Advisor for Mashonaland East Region
grupande@yahoo.com

Sawuti Abigirl

Senior teacher
Head of Department
Katsenga Secondary school
Zimbabwe
abigirlsawuti@gmail.com

Abstract: *Many nations' political and religious landscapes are marred by political and religious intolerance and this often is seen when elections are being conducted in various countries. People are killed, maimed or their properties are destroyed just because they belong to a different political party or are of a different religious group. It is crucial to realise that it is difficult to teach the old people to be politically or religiously tolerant but it is easy to cultivate political and religious tolerance in students in colleges. The college environment presents an excellent platform to cultivate religious and political tolerance by allowing multi-faith organisations to operate in college environments. The college can cultivate religious tolerance by giving equal space and recognition to different sorority and fraternity organisations which are operating in the college environments thereby cultivating a sense of accepting each other even though we differ in our beliefs and practices. By upholding democratic principles in student governance, it is hoped that such practices will diffuse gradually into the larger society, since the products of the education system are the ones that go on to make the society. This paper will focus on justification of religious and political tolerance, application of programs promoting political tolerance in student affairs, Fowlers' theory of faith, Kohlberg theory of moral development and Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The fact that the college environment is now a salad bowl in terms of student diversity, it is crucial to realise that students should be taught to be religiously and politically tolerant. Higher education has a role in developing the democratic culture without which democratic institutions and societies cannot function or exist. It is important to realize that these attitudes cannot be developed simply by seeing and learning, therefore, students must be encouraged to participate, and feel the impact of their participation. Student affairs professionals are in a unique and powerful position to influence students' political and religious tolerance and increase their likelihood to participate in civic institutions. These two aspects, religion and politics are an integral part of college student identity and therefore essential in the development of the "whole student" as the student endeavours to discover ethical and spiritual meaning in life (Braskamp, 2007; Rodgers, 1990). This article is going to focus on cultural compatibility programs that can be designed to promote political and religious tolerance in institutions of higher learning. Key words like tolerance, religious tolerance and political tolerance are going to be operationalised. Theoretical frameworks of Kohlberg, Perry, and Fowler, are going to be explored.

1.1. Definition of Terms

Tolerance: is a non-critical and neutral acceptance of just about everything someone says or does.

Religious tolerance: is when people allow others to think about God(s) in ways that they do not think are true.

Political tolerance: is a willingness to extend basic constitutional rights; the right to speak, to publish, to run for office; to offensive groups and ideas and civic liberties to persons whose views are different from ones' own.

1.2. Justification of Religious and Political Tolerance

Higher education has an unprecedented opportunity to influence democratic knowledge, dispositions, and habits of the heart that graduates carry with them into the public square” (Ehrlich, 2000: 1). Helping students navigate and understand the civic and social institutions that shape their lives should be a fundamental responsibility of student affairs professionals. Political and religious identities are part and parcel of a greater sense of self and a critical component in how students make meaning. Owing to the importance attached to religious and political issues, it is therefore vital that the student affairs designs programs to enhance the understanding in college students of spirituality, the role it plays in their lives and how colleges can be more effective in facilitating students’ political and spiritual development.

Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1996; Peter 1998; Ayinla, 2003). Religion is seen as one of the systems of faith that are based on the beliefs in the existence of a particular God or gods.

Colleges cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision making. It is therefore mandatory for the student affairs department to take the initiative to help students realize the values and skills of our democratic society and their need to claim ownership of it. Avery, (2001) says that democracy functions better when there is perfect harmony between the will and respect for the rights individuals and groups in the minority. The culturally compatible hypothesis (Jordan & Tharp, 1979) assumes that culturally-based differences between the home and school may lead to “conflicts, misunderstandings, and ultimately failure for those students” (Ledlow, 1992:23). The use of the cultural compatibility mode by student affairs takes responsibility for helping students realize the values and skills of our democratic society and their need to claim ownership of it as well as developing political and religious tolerance. This hypothesis suggests that for some groups of students, transition to school is difficult because these differences are too overwhelming to overcome. Further, if these differences were minimized, then all students would have an equal opportunity to achieve success (Tharp et al. 1994b)

Our community may not approve of some or other religious practices and it is very possible to prevent them from taking place. However blocking them is being insensitive to cultural and religious diversity and students’ rights and this may lead to violent confrontation or affect student involvement as some students will be segregated on the basis of religion. This has serious repercussions on student co-operation and engagement; retention and success thus lead to lower graduation rates and a defeat of the institutions’ goal. The Zimbabwean constitution advocates for religious liberty therefore it is the duty of the state to prevent attempts to interfere with the practices of others, this therefore means that religious tolerance is institutionalised (Spector, 2008). Owing to this revelation thus institutions of higher learning have an obligation to design programs to promote religious and political tolerance. Religious and political tolerances are also based on the universal declaration of human rights whose thrust is to promote tolerance among people as they live together. Some of the universal declarations which promote human rights and tolerance are listed below:

2. UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it is independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6: Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8: Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 12: no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence or to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14: (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15: (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

3.1. Kohlberg Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1971) suggests that as students develop, they move from seeing only moral absolutes where nuanced political topics may be difficult to understand and discuss to identifying with the values of their environment in the conventional level (Evans et al. 1998). In these stages, students might adopt political dispositions that are comfortable and convenient given their living situation with family, friends, or residence hall mates. In the post-conventional level, each individual student may be able to clearly define positions on issues that inform her or his choices in various elections.

3.2. Perrys' Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development

Perry's theory (1970) asserts that experiences encountered in life shape a students' intellectual and ethical development. Students move through a position of moral absolutes or dualism to a point of considering multiple perspectives or multiplicity (Evans et al. 1998). In the relativism stage, students may engage in political rallies to obtain more information about political parties or individual candidates in an attempt to sort through multiple truths and different positions to come to their own conclusions on issues of political and religious tolerance. It is critical to realise that the college is a miniature society which invariably reflects what happens in the larger society so if nations are to have people who have political and religious tolerance, then the starting point is the

school system where such values can easily be cultivated. The college environment by allowing the practice of multi-faith organisations and inter denominations crusades deliberately will be cultivating the spirit of tolerance among students whose influence in society is very crucial. The students who participate in these organisations will come to appreciate that we should live harmoniously despite of our different affiliations to different denominations. The above situation will allow the students to celebrate diversity instead of being involved in prejudice and discrimination.

3.3. Fowlers' Theory of Faith

Fowler (2001) says that faith is a human universal whereby people make meaning of their lives. A person's faith develops or is transformed through several stages that he characterizes as sequential, invariant, and hierarchical. Faith, according to Coyle (2011), describes the underlying meaning-making process used by all people regardless of their beliefs, and occurs as individuals place personal trust and loyalty in one or more "centre of value" such as religion, family, money, power among others. Fowler (2001) says that faith is a human universal whereby people make meaning of their lives.

Our community may not approve of the practices of some or other religions and, collectively, we may be able to prevent these from taking place. However, if we act to suppress such practices, then we may provoke civil unrest and this may lead to violent confrontation or perhaps even war between rival religious groups. The rise of religious tolerance in Europe is typically associated with the enlightenment. As students begin their college experience, freshmen have high expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development. They place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping them develop personal values, and encouraging their expression of spirituality. Varying degrees of spirituality and religiousness also translate into significant differences in students' political and social attitudes. Spiritual and religious beliefs and practices also play a role in a students' psychological and physical well-being. Religious activities provide a basis for social support outside of the home, thus combating the loneliness and isolation which can lead to mental health problems (Sherkat & Ellison 1999).

3.4. Application of Religious Tolerance

Religious tolerance can be inculcated through charitable involvement, for example donating in cash or in kind towards victims of national disasters such as the Thokwe-Mkosi flood victims in Zimbabwe, old peoples' homes, orphanages, among others. This helps students to cultivate an ethic of caring and learn ways to promote community welfare. Religious engagement programs can be introduced to promote religious engagement, for example, attending religious services, praying, and reading sacred texts. The chaplain can coordinate formation of the Christian Union on college campuses and encourage students to take time away from their busy lives to reflect on their experiences in the light of their beliefs and values in relation to those of their colleagues. This helps to create religious involvement among students and intermingling students from different religions and this gives rise to student involvement and has a part to play in student retention and students tolerance to various political and religious organisations.

A first aid club can be introduced on campus to introduce the ethic of care amongst students as they care for the diverse student population in times of need. This can be coupled with developing commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, for example caring for a sick colleague after hours by the sub-warden. Students from various religious groups at college frequently help connect colleges with the surrounding communities, and provide volunteers and partnerships with groups like the scouting groups and these partnerships have a direct bearing on cultivating a sense of tolerance of each other among students.

The development of prayer groups among students on campus is one way of ensuring that students become involved, interact with each other as they share testimonies and help each other to reduce pain and suffering and gain hope in life activities despite difficulties being faced because of the assurance that there is a 'Supreme being'. To add on, this leads to the development of an ecumenical world view which reflects interest in different religious traditions.

Culture nights and workshops on diversity in students' religious beliefs and practices also promote religious tolerance. The chaplain can invite resource persons to lead workshops/seminars

on campus on religious issues or matters related to world religions or harmonious living for example on health issues or family life with reference to the Holy Book. The promotion of interfaith dialogue on campuses provides students with opportunities to learn about different religions through belief fairs, “inter-faith expos,” among others. This gives an opportunity for students to examine the intersections of spirituality, religion, or faith with culture.

Religious participation and personal religiosity can help lower rates of substance abuse, and limit activities that undermine college careers (Regnerus 2000). Students who participate in religious groups have made a choice about social commitments. Alcohol and substance abuse are among the most important factors predicting negative educational outcomes. Most religious groups oppose alcohol use, or at least militate against drunkenness. Hence, students who choose to join religious groups are going to be less likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs (Regnerus 2000). Depression, loneliness, and anxiety are also strongly associated with poor college performance but through students’ interaction, students can assist each other by sharing experiences and help each other on how best to overcome anxiety and depression.

3.5. Research on Religious and Political Tolerance

Hyman and Sheatley(1953), pointed out that the higher the education level, the higher the political tolerance. Holt and Tygart (1969), submitted that through education, gross categories are broken down and the student learns to make subtle distinctions and qualified judgements. According to Lipset(1963), education subjects the student to cross pressures, which leads to greater tolerance of opposition views. Selvin and Hagsirom(1960), pointed out that certain college courses, such as political science and history, have tolerance as a major theme. The manner in which students are oriented towards the university partly determines the extent to which the university experience increases political tolerance. Studies dating back to the 1960s consistently found that attending college led to declines in students’ religious beliefs and practices (Astin, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Kuh, 1976, 1999, 2000, August 15; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Overall, these studies found that college had a liberalizing effect on students’ religious attitudes and beliefs, and that by their senior year students’ beliefs were more individual and less dogmatic. Moreover, students experienced marked declines in their involvement in religious activities, such as attending services of worship. In particular, students’ interactions with other members of the campus community appeared to influence changes in their religious beliefs and practices. For example, students who lived at home were more likely to sustain their religious identities. Stronger religious commitments among faculty and peers also helped students maintain their religious beliefs.

A number of recent studies, however, have detected an increased interest in politics, religion and spirituality among students attending colleges and universities. A national poll conducted in March 2006 by Harvard’s Institute of Politics (2006) found that 70 percent of current undergraduates said that religion is important in their lives. Moreover, of the 1,200 students in the sample, more than three times as many indicated that they have become more spiritual since entering college than those who have become less spiritual (25 percent versus 7 percent). A number of scholars have also found evidence of strong student interest and involvement in religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Hartley, 2004; Lee, 2002).

An attitude of tolerance is only possible when some action or practice is objectionable to us, but there are overriding reasons to allow that action or practice to take place. An act of tolerance is a students’ intentional and principled refraining from interfering with an opposed other (or their behaviour) in situations of diversity, where the student believes he/she has the power to interfere (Cohen (2004: 69). To reconnect college students with political affairs and traditional forms of political involvement, faculty and program advisers need to help students see the links between their direct service activities, personal commitments, and lifestyle choices on the one hand and related institutional and policy questions on the other. (Colby et al, 2003: 19). There is need for greater understanding and tolerance among individuals of diverse religions or political affiliations. This is possible when people know more about the religion and political sensitivity. Religious and political insults are less likely to occur out of ignorance hence the need for greater understanding and tolerance. Intolerance in political circles occurs when students’ interests are threatened or when they stand to lose benefits, powers and rights they enjoy, for example a post in

the student representative council. It can also stem out in any environment where the rules of the democracy are unfairly enforced in favour of one group, for example, one ethnic group, the Shonas or Ndebeles in Zimbabwe.

3.6. Application of Programs Promoting Political Tolerance in Student Affairs

College civic education is one program that can be introduced so as to promote political tolerance. Through education on community service, the student affairs campus life director can integrate the college and the community, for example, students can engage in clean-up campaigns at market places or hospitals in a bid to solve public problems. Students who are engaged in significant community-based work are deepening their learning about the issues that matter to them. They are getting to know their neighbours, to work with people across different races, gender, classes, religions, and interests (Battistoni, 2003). However it has been argued that community service is based on apolitical notions of volunteerism with too few efforts to link involvement in community with notions of power (Boyte 2004). Community development projects can be undertaken by students, for example, clearing a portion of the main road where grass has overgrown to the extent of obstructing motorists in the community. Service learning programs would lead to greater political participation because they are filled with political implications that bright students are likely to recognize.

The primary goal of governance is to enable an educational entity to realize fully its stated mission and goals and to achieve these in the most effective and efficient manner that benefits the institution and its students. Institutions should seek to create a governance environment in which issues concerning mission, vision, program planning, resource allocation and others, as appropriate, can be discussed openly by those who are responsible for each activity. The formation of student representative councils on higher education institutions is one way of promoting political tolerance and making student gain self-confidence and negotiating skills as they represent concerns of the students and develop leadership skills through the various workshops and seminars. The student representative council can negotiate through the dean to hold Africa day celebrations through speeches as a way of promoting political tolerance.

The warden can design anger management courses to improve both political and religious tolerance. As students interact in halls of residence, conflicts are bound to develop owing to differing opinions so this can help to settle disputes of political or religious nature. The warden and sub-warden can use various sporting activities to unify students from various backgrounds politically and religiously. To add on, religious organisations can sponsor tournaments, for example the Yadda Ministries of Prophet Magaya is sponsoring sporting tournaments in Zimbabwe. Students can also be involved in promoting deliberative democracy on college campuses through participating in deliberative forums on issues such as hate speech, or race relations.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, adhering to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices plays a role in students' psychological and physical well-being. The culturally compatible hypothesis has been used to explain the culturally-based differences between the home and school, such as religion and politics as leading to "conflicts, misunderstandings, and ultimately failure for the students. The cultural compatibility mode has been seen as a way that student affairs can use to show responsibility towards helping students realize the values and skills of our democratic society and their need to claim ownership and develop political and religious tolerance. Spirituality and religiousness have been seen as related to physical well-being, the relationships with psychological health are nuanced and complex. Astin, (1975) says that, students are more likely to persist at religious colleges if their own religious backgrounds are similar because it is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The student representative council to be made in such a way that it includes representatives from the diverse religious groups so that they participate in decision-making.
- Encourage effective and functional platforms for ethno-religious students, at all levels, so that through the establishment of a network for conflict prevention and management would be easily possible.

- Treat students fairly and avoid any form of discrimination, neglect and marginalisation.
- Lecturers and faculty should strive to create a culturally inclusive classroom environment(s), for example, use of language and modes of address, positive interaction with students, actively discouraging classroom incivilities, and encouraging open, honest and respectful discussions.
- Conduct workshops on tolerance and social justice in colleges while focussing on moral education for citizens/ students in a democratic college community.

REFERENCES

- Astin, A. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Avery, P. (2001). *Developing political tolerance*. In Rukambe, J. (2009: 17–18 March). *Promoting political tolerance: Experiences from selected countries*. Windhoek. International IDEA
- Ayinla, S. A. (2003). *Managing religious intolerance and violence in Nigeria, problems and solutions*. Paper Presented at the National Conference on social problems, development and the challenges of globalization, organized by Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife.
- Battistoni, R. (2003). Interviewed by Barbara Roswell. "From service-learning to service politics." *Reflections* 3, 1-6.
- Braskamp, L. A. (2007). Fostering religious and spiritual development of students during college [Electronic version]. *Essay Forum on the religious engagements of American Undergraduates*, 1-10. Retrieved July 18, 2007 from <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/>
- Boyte, H. (2004). *Everyday politics: Reconnecting citizens and public life*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania
- Byrant, A. N., Choi, J. Y., & Yasuno, M. (2003). Understanding the religious and Spiritual dimensions of students' lives in the first year of college. *Journal of college student development*, 44(6), 723-745.
- Cohen, A. J. (2004). 'What toleration is'. *Ethics* 115: 68-95.
- Evans, N. J. , Forney, D. S. & Guido DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Fowler, J. W. (2001). Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges. *International Journal for the Psychology of religion*, 11, 159-172.
- Feldman, K.A. & Newcomb, T.M. (1969). *The impact of college students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Gastil, J. & Levine, P. (Eds). (2005). *The deliberative democracy handbook: Strategies for effective civic engagement in the Twenty-First Century*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Geertz, C. (1996). *Primordial Ties*. In John, H. & Anthony, D. S. (Eds.), *Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hartley, H. V. (2004b, November 6). *The relationship of religious involvement to the social integration and persistence of first-year students*. Paper presented at the Association of Study of Higher Education, Kansas City, MO
- Jordan, C., & Tharp, R. G. (1979). *Culture and education*. In Marsella, A. J., Tharp, R.G. & Ciborowski (Eds), *Perspectives in cross-cultural psychology* (pp 265-285). New York: Academic Press.
- Kuh, G. D. (1976). Persistence of the impact of college on attitudes and values. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 17, 116-122.
- Kuh, G.D. (1999). How are we doing? Tracking the quality of undergraduate experience, 1960s to the present. *The review of Higher Education*, 22, 99-119
- Ledlow, S. (1992). Is cultural discontinuity an adequate explanation for dropping out? *Journal of American Indian education*. 31(3), 21 – 36.
- Lee, J. J. (2002). Religion and college attendance: Change among students. *The review Higher Education*, 25(4), 369-384.

- Pascarella , E. T. & Terenzini, P.T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Peter, O. F. (1998). Plateau crisis claimed 54,000 lives. *The cities of perpetual public work*, 722. Retrieved May 10, 2012, from www.amarujari.com/amar/pdf/parish.pdf
- Sherkat, D. E. and Ellison, C. G. (1999). "Recent developments and current controversies in the sociology of religion." *Annual review of sociology*, 25, 363-394.
- Spector, H. (2008). *Autonomy and rights: The moral foundations of liberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tharp, R. G. ; Dalton, S.S. ; & Yamauchi, L.A. (1994b). Principles of cultural compatible Native American education. *Journal of Navajo education*, 11, 33-39.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Gift Rupande is a senior lecturer, an academician and an educationist who has vast experience in education spanning for over fifteen years. Gift was also a part time lecturer at Kushinga Phikelela Polytechnic college in the Department of Adult Education. Gift is a passionate researcher who has written several published research articles. Gift is a renowned ODL scholar and presenter who has presented papers at various international conferences. Gift Rupande holds a masters degree in educational psychology (Midlands State University) and is currently a DPhil candidate with the Zimbabwe Open University.



Sawuti Abigirl is senior teacher, Head of Department Technical subjects, and a School Counsellor at Katsenga Secondary school in Zimbabwe. She has a Master of Science in Student Affairs from Midlands State University and also holds a BSc in Counselling (BSc C) from Zimbabwe Open University. Her hobbies include reading Shakespearean literature, drama, camping and sewing.