Dangerous Liaisons: Non-Western religious minority groups and American public education

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Introduction

Public education and so many institutions charged with serving the public are struggling to serve cultural minority groups who see the world and interact with it in ways quite foreign to mainstream America. A lack of knowledge, on the part of public institutions, has led to the further alienation of certain minority subgroups and has made the public institutions that serve them ineffective. Increasing institutional knowledge of cultural minority groups is one of the critical steps American public educators must take towards cultural competency (Hoffman, 2004).

The separation of church and state is mandated by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (The United States Constitution). The United State’s explicit and systemic distinction between public life and personal religious practices may be the reason it has been able to avoid major civil conflicts over religion. This is a significant achievement for the United States, given the extremely pluralistic nature of its population. Certainly, many countries that have closer ties between state and religion have had more societal unrest as a result (Robinson, 2008). There is no disputing that the American public education system is an arm of the state (United States Department of Education, 2009). And so, the American public education system works to uphold the idea of separation of church and state in order to maintain a perception of religious neutrality for the diverse constituents it serves. American students, at large, represent a myriad of spiritual, religious, as well as non-religious backgrounds within American social fabric (Robinson, 2008). This makes religion a complicated issue for public educators to negotiate.

Who can blame public educators for minimizing the discussion of religion in the classroom or out? Daniel (2004) addressed the challenges that government agencies, like public education institutions, face in appeasing the American public with the practice of religious neutrality. To illustrate the sensitive politics of religion and government, Daniel documented Congressman Chet Edwards in a 2007 speech stating, “This country has repeatedly witnessed efforts to bring together government and religion and make religion less a matter of free conscience than a state requirement (Daniel, 2004, p. 654).

The Problem

Historically, the religion which has impacted the American psyche more than all others has been Christianity (Sittser, 2008), but that influence may be waning. In 2009, Newsweek reported that since 1990 the percentage of Americans who identified themselves as Christians fell a full ten percentage points, from 86 to 76 percent. Newsweek went on to report that a separate Pew poll found that the percentage of Americans who are unaffiliated with any religion has doubled in recent years. Americans identifying themselves as atheist or agnostic multiplied fourfold from 1990 to 2009, increasing from one million to nearly four million. Newsweek concluded by reporting that two thirds of Americans polled (68 percent) now say religion is “losing influence” in American society (Newsweek, 2009). While Christianity and religion, in general, may have lost the impact at once had on Americans, it has left a
lasting impression. In fact, American mainstream’s sense of justice and core values, so much a part of our cultural DNA, can be attributed to the influence of Christianity (Jenkins, 2004).

Whether or not Americans are collectively less religious today than in the past, Christianity has played a major role in the development of the kind of Western thought employed by the average American. And so, when it comes to making sense of world religions, the average American uses a pseudo-Christian lens to do so. This is extremely problematic when it comes to trying to understand non-Western religions, as they do not easily fit into the Western paradigm of what a religion should look like, at least in Judeo-Christian terms (Sittser, 2008). Kingdon (1997) acknowledges the difficulties public educators face in negotiating the religious landscape of society in serving public school students and adds, “Education has avoided the encounter with religion either because religion was too personal or because religions, from a Western Christian perspective, were only interested in converting people to their beliefs” (p. ii). Here, Kingdon does not assert all Westerners are Christian, but he does allude to the fact that Western culture has been profoundly impacted by Christianity.

Nielsen (2001) shares similar sentiments and asserts that much fear exists around the notion of spirituality. This stems from the concern that spirituality indoctrinates particular beliefs, values, and habits on others. Nielsen states this fear is heightened when young, impressionable minds are on the line. Both Kingdon (1997) and Nielsen (2001) indicate that the typical Westerner may assume that non-Western religions approach the practice of proselytizing in the same manner Christianity has. As will be seen, many non-Western religions are not at all concerned with converting others to their faith. All of this serves to demonstrate that while the Christian religion may be less important on a personal level to Americans than it once was, its pervasive influence on Western culture, transmitted to America via Europe, has shaped the way the American mind processes information and views the world (Baker, 2008).

To summarize, American public educators are challenged by three factors in dealing with the ramifications of religion in schools. First, in an effort to maintain a neutral stance on the topic of religion and in upholding the principle of the separation of church and state, public education has inadvertently quieted important and meaningful discussions regarding religion in schools. Second, in witnessing the decline of religion’s influence in American society at large, public education may have been lulled into assuming religion is less important to all Americans equally. Third, like the average American, public educators (even the non-religious ones) commonly see other world religions through a Western and pseudo-Christian lens. The culmination of these factors indicate that public educators have some work to do in preparing to serve in ever more diverse student population. With all that educators deal with in the current high-stakes era of accountability, it is no wonder a subject as hard to comprehend as religion is not foremost on the education agenda. Nevertheless, there are numerous situations when religion is something that cannot be ignored.

Review of Literature

In 2004, The Associated Press reported that school officials at Oklahoma’s Muskogee School District suspended a sixth grade Muslim female student twice for wearing a head scarf, as it violated the school’s dress code. The girl wore the head covering in order to meet her religious obligations to have her head covered. School officials reportedly took discipline action against the girl exactly two years after the September 11th (2001) terrorist attacks on the United States. The officials informed the
Muslim student that other students were “frightened” by her scarf. The Muskogee School District was subsequently sued by a Virginia-based civil liberties group, which claimed the district’s dress code violated the Muslim student’s rights to free speech and exercise of religion. As a result of the lawsuit, the Muslim student was allowed to wear her head scarf at school (First Amendment Center, 2009). While it may be argued that The Muskogee School District allowed the emotions of a post September 11th world to influence their actions, two California events offer more complicated scenarios.

The Livingston Union School District barred two brothers and a sister, ages 7, 8 and 10, from their elementary school in Livingston for carrying knives. However, these were no ordinary knives. The knives, which are called kirpans and usually have a 4-inch blade, are worn by Khalsa Sikhs in sheaths under their clothes, as one of five symbols of devotion to God. The students’ family sued the school district, claiming the policy placed an unlawful burden on their freedom of religion. In 1997, The ACLU of Northern California announced that they had resolved a lawsuit with the Livingston Union School District concerning the rights of baptized Sikh students to wear symbolic ceremonial knives to school (ACLU of Northern California, 2009). The ACLU of Northern California’s website reports that, “The parties described the settlement — which will allow the students to wear the kirpans subject to strict limitations on size and other restrictions designed to assure that they cannot be misused — as an agreement intended to promote the two important goals of religious freedom and school security”. The challenges of effectively serving those of religious minority backgrounds are not confined to public education. In fact, the Merced County medical community dealt with a particular difficult case involving a religious minority group in the nineteen-eighties.

In her book, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, Fadiman(1997) recounts the story of how doctors’ ignorance of the Hmong religion led to a breakdown in the doctor-patient relationship and to heartbreak. In 1982, the Lees (a Hmong couple), had a baby girl. The Lee’s daughter began suffering from severe epileptic seizures at three months old. Practitioners of traditional Hmong animism, the Lees recognized the symptoms as being rooted in a spiritual cause, rather than a physical one. Therefore, they were not completely beholden to doctors’ treatment plans. Determining that the parents were being noncompliant and potentially endangering their daughter’s life, doctors obtained a court order which removed their daughter from the Lee’s home and placed her in foster care. The Lees eventually did get their daughter back. However, soon thereafter the Lee’s daughter had a massive seizure, which left her brain dead (Fadiman, 1997). This case occurred in Merced County and makes one wonder how more knowledge regarding the Hmong religion could have helped doctors better serve the Lees.

It is not this researcher’s intention to suggest that in either scenario those serving the Hmong family or those serving the Sikh students had anything other than good intentions in mind. And, who could argue that the Lee’s daughter would have fared better had the Lees followed doctors’ treatment plans more closely? Nevertheless, had doctors been better informed regarding the religious background of the Hmong and leveraged that knowledge to communicate more effectively with them, the story would have likely had a different outcome. The fact is that the ethnic make-up of American students has become increasingly diverse over the last forty years. Hoffman (2004) describes American schools as cultural entities replete with amazing arrays of artifacts, rituals, and rites of passage all of which impact directly on the manner in which their “inhabitants negotiate the terms of their existence within those institutions” (Hoffman, 2004). There are a number of professions that, like education, serve the public. As it is with the field of education, the institutions these professions represent are facing the challenges of serving
people of culturally diverse backgrounds. The medical field, for one, is demonstrating an effort to improve its ability to serve clients of minority religion backgrounds.

In their publication, “Cultural Competence Education” (2005), the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) addressed the critical need for cultural competence in the health care profession. The article establishes that religion is one of the major components of culture. Purportedly, without an understanding of the cultural factors that affect their patients, medical professionals are not able to provide quality medical services and treatment. “With the ever-increasing diversity of the population of the United States and strong evidence of racial and ethnic disparities in health care, it is critically important that health care professionals are educated specifically to address issues of culture in an effective manner” (p. 1). The social work profession is also taking the topic of religion, as it pertains to serving its clients, very seriously.

Falgoust, (2008), an expert and scholar in the area of social work, articulates the ramifications of religion on that field. She impresses upon practitioners of social work that in order to be effective in their work, they must be sensitive to the spirituality of their clients. Hoyt (2008) points to the pervasive influence of religion and spirituality in the personal, cultural, and political affairs of those that social workers serve. He does not make light of the fact that cultivating knowledge about a diverse and significant number of religions is extremely challenging. Hoyt contends that addressing the spirituality of their clientele is also the responsibility of nonspiritual social workers, irregardless of where they stand on the topic of religion (Hoyt, 2002).

In addressing practitioners and academics in the field of counseling, Robertson (2008) urges those in the counseling profession to better serve the public by learning more about the religions their clientele subscribe to. Overstreet (2008) concurs with Robertson and argues that religion should be a subject that counselors become more competent about. Robertson (2008) went on to suggest that the governing bodies of the counseling profession support the discussion of religious and spiritual beliefs in counseling. And yet, as Hall (2004) explains, spiritual and religious material continues to be neglected in counselor training programs. Robertson (2008) is concerned that within counseling, spiritual competency and curricular recommendations have been based more on speculation about what should be taught than on empirical evidence.

Discussion and Reflection

A discussion regarding culturally competence should start with defining what the term means. “Culture” is a broad term which covers numerous patterns of human behavior like: language, thoughts, actions, customs, and beliefs. It can also be related to racial, ethnic, social, or religious groups. “Competence” refers to the ability an individual or organization has to function effectively within the context of the cultural beliefs, practices, and needs represented by the clients they serve (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Research by Olsen, Bhattacharya, and Scharf (2006) suggests that organizations working to understand and respond to cultural differences among those they serve have the power to make a strong positive impact. In regards to specifically serving students in public education, these researchers state, “Cultural competency is therefore not a luxury, but an important foundation for organizations – making it possible to serve all communities, bridge across differences, and ultimately improve the social, health and educational outcomes of children and youth” (p. 4).

Progress towards cultural competency is a developmental process that occurs along a continuum and
over time. According to Cross et al., there are six progressive phases along the cultural competence continuum: 1) cultural destructiveness, 2) cultural incapacity, 3) cultural blindness, 4) cultural pre-competence, 5) cultural competency, and 6) cultural proficiency (Cross et al., 1989, p. v). King (2009) suggested that, at best, most public sector organizations providing services to children and families fall between cultural incapacity and cultural blindness on the continuum. Cross et al. highly recommend organizations serving the public assess where they fall along the continuum. Without such an assessment, it would be impossible for organizations to know where progress towards cultural competence is needed.

Paz (2008) describes how public educators can set the tone for a positive school community that embraces diversity and nurtures the hearts and minds of students from all backgrounds, by making a concerted effort to gain insider information regarding the cultural minority subgroups they serve. Lacking knowledge regarding cultural subgroups means public educators lack the capacity to relate competently with those they are charged to serve. Of course, it is what you do with knowledge that can make a real difference. To this end, Cross et al., indicates that taking steps to gain a greater understanding of minority cultural groups should lead to an organization “(1) Valuing diversity; (2) Building the capacity for cultural self-assessment; (3) Being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact; (4) Institutionalizing cultural knowledge; and (5) Adapting service delivery to reflect an understanding of diversity among and within cultures” (Cross et al., 1989, p. v). And so, cultural competence is obtaining cultural information and then applying that knowledge.

At best, a lack of understanding regarding a religious minority group being served by the American public education system can lead to embarrassing cultural misunderstandings. Too many of these types of awkward moments can lead to the social alienation of student subgroups. At worst, a lack of knowledge on the part of public educators could lead to unintentionally defiling a student’s (or his family’s) idea of what is spiritually sacred. Religion is a major component of culture. Therefore, a greater understanding of world religions leads to a greater degree of cultural competency (Paz, 2008).

References


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