

Universities, faith and respect: background paper

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Social and international development as a means of promoting respect

Upon observational analysis it becomes quite evident that there is an inherent relationship between faith and development. Poverty and social justice tend to be quite pressing matters of concern that are core within various faiths and articulated in one way or another as a matter of importance. Such a focus on poverty not only demonstrates the links with development but also speaks to the potential bonds between different faiths as there is a shared focus on exclusion and many other development-related topics. While some may maintain that religion and development do not belong in the same sphere, the common ground it holds could be more important than any potential disparities. As it has been noted, 'we live in dangerous times, with dangerous roads ahead, and such roads are best travelled together with those whose direction and path are essentially the same' (Marshall, 2005). Faith in development deserves important recognition for various reasons:

- Faith-based initiatives and organisations are often best-placed to engage with local communities due to their social and religious capital having high levels of trust/respect
- Faith institutions play major roles in important development work such as health, education
- While faith can be an underlying cause of some conflicts, faith institutions also play an important part in conflict prevention with programmes addressing both structural and cultural violence. They are also heavily involved in reconciliation efforts during conflict and in post-conflict reconstruction
- Faith institutions span national boundaries and can be truly international in their reach

Faith, development and higher education

Given this intrinsic link between faith and development, one then wonders how it may link to the field of higher education institutions and how it can be harnessed for the greater good of promoting mutual respect. The contribution of higher education to development is widely accepted (ACU, 2011) and highly-skilled professionals across a range of disciplines are constantly being supplied by universities. It would seem that there is a significant opportunity within this realm of education whereby interfaith dialogue particularly has a place. Such approaches could be separated into micro and macro level methods. On a micro level, social development is incorporated into the institution's concerns and domestic local issues are addressed by interfaith approaches – for example this could include local civic work with poor communities from other faiths. Another example of a micro approach could be interfaith development topics incorporated in the curriculum. On a macro level, interuniversity partnerships may operate on a grander national scale or even cross international borders. Such interuniversity partnerships are especially notable as they have the potential to cohesively combine strengths to face large-scale development challenges. With both micro and macro approaches there is something positive to gain in terms of mutual respect.

It could be argued that higher education has a responsibility for educating students who are global citizens, strengthening social cohesion and thereby contributing to the common good. Therefore 'such an education demands an engagement with the reality of religious diversity' (Patel & Meyer, 2011). Responding to religious diversity can take the route of cooperation or conflict – if we are to consider that higher education institutions play an important role in preparing global citizens then their role can be vital to contributing to the path of cooperation. Cooperation may prevent civil strife and also build stronger communities – as Putnam (2007) argues, social capital significantly increases when individuals or communities are engaged in diversity via cooperative action. It can even prevent conflict in some instances. Interfaith cooperation is therefore not merely a nice idea but becomes a greater civic concern and holds the potential of solutions for real social tensions (Patel & Meyer, 2011).

Strategies for integrating faith, justice and civic learning

The following recommendations have been made regarding the possibilities for integrating faith and civic learning (Laboe & Nass, 2012):

1. Expand and diversify pedagogical practices to incorporate reflective learning, experiential and service-learning, recognise community partners outside of the institution.
2. Engage diverse religious perspectives and voices to introduce moral conversation as an important locus of learning and civic engagement. Engage in a civil and constructive way.
3. Initiate and foster faculty development programmes that prepare educators to engage and incorporate religious, faith, moral, and community perspectives into learning. Harness educators' wealth of knowledge in ways that can best foster student learning and development toward civic engagement.
4. Offer retreat programmes/cohort seminars/weekend programmes that foster reflective learning and the integration of civic, moral, and faith dimension into the self-understanding and habitual practice of educators. Educators must experience and participate in what they are expected to deliver.
5. Invite and integrate faith and spiritual commitments into student leadership development programmes that involve service and reflections on justice. Student leaders can exert significant influence among their peers and on student culture.
6. Connect to allies on campus and nationally who share an interest in this integration of faith into learning.

Following on from the above, it has been asserted that education needs to be innovative and practical rather than just theoretical (Khalifa & Sandholz, 2011). Conventional educational processes can be perceived as of limited use when addressing such complex challenges as development, which also includes the intrinsic topic of sustainability. Some further approaches that have been suggested for making the most use of higher education in addressing sustainability are as follows (op cit.):

- Inter-disciplinarity

'The traditional single disciplinary approach is no longer appropriate to address the complexity imbedded in the concept of SD. Therefore, a paradigm shift towards a holistic view involving cooperation between various disciplines is needed'.

- Trans-disciplinarity

'Trans-disciplinarity literally goes beyond the disciplines. While the principle of inter-disciplinarity calls for cooperation across different subjects and disciplines, trans-disciplinarity involves intense interaction between academics and practitioners in order to promote a mutual learning process between them' (Steiner & Posch, 2006). It is not possible to effectively research or teach sustainable development of society without interacting with society.

- Self-regulated learning

This emphasises 'the emerging autonomy and responsibility of students to take charge of their own learning'. The student plays the most active role rather than the professor and finds all relevant information themselves. The role of the professor is merely as a facilitator.

- University networking

'Networks' becomes a key term in literature addressing higher education efforts for sustainability. The growth of international university alliances/associations/consortia has increased at a rapid pace. Zha (2010) argued 'under globalisation, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, universities in different parts of the world need to be closely linked, as the rhetoric suggests, in order to benefit both education and research'.

Questions for consideration

- Do higher education institutions have a responsibility for educating students for global citizenship and how does one avoid imposing values?
- Are the potentials of interfaith dialogue for development realistic or romanticised?
- Do approaches to social and international development need to be more practical than theoretical to gain more ground in promoting interfaith mutual respect?