

**Exploring Openness to Religious Diversity Among
Leadership Students Who are Religious**

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Abstract

Prior work in spirituality and leadership has argued for leaders to develop “respectful pluralism.” This qualitative study explores openness to religious diversity among leadership students who are religious, and who score high in intercultural sensitivity. Data was collected through in-person interviews, revealing six themes: curiosity, clarifying boundaries, broadening my view, inner struggle, relationship is more important, and not there yet. The importance of these themes, and implications for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Spirituality and leadership have been popular topics in the academic literature of late, covering a range of topics from accommodating religion and spirituality in the workplace (Cash & Gray, 2000) to developing organizational spirituality (Konz & Ryan, 1999). While some authors have put forth a specific model of spirituality and leadership (Fry, Bitucci, & Cedillo, 2005), others have tried to describe the many ways leaders approach spirituality at work (Wax, 2007; Nash & McLennan, 2001). In the midst of this broad examination of spirituality and leadership, a specific thread of inquiry has focused on the dangers of bringing religious and spiritual beliefs into the workplace. Authors exploring this theme have warned against attempts to adapt individual spirituality to meet the financial needs of organizations (Nadesan, 1999), control or exploit members (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006), or create internal motivations for greater effort (Elmes & Smith, 2001). Some have even likened corporate efforts to create cohesion through spirituality as a form of “corporate cultism” (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002).

The risk of coercion is not unique to organizations. The leader who seeks to be overtly religious at work can also be problematic. Nash and McLennan (2001) warned that some forms of religious adherence can bind leaders to their religion, leading to claims of proselytizing or abdicating leadership responsibility to an ecclesiastical authority.

In response to these perceived risks associated with spiritual and religious expression in the workplace, Hicks (2002) attempted to reframe the discussion of spirituality and leadership. Instead of imposing of one view of the optimal spirituality, Hicks argued that the proper role for leaders was to inspire organizations that can effectively negotiate religious and spiritual differences. Hicks later expounded on this idea, calling for an attitude of “respectful pluralism” (Hicks, 2003). According to Hicks, this attitude of openness to other religions is comprised of equal respect, freedom from coercion, the ability to express one’s religion, and a presumption of inclusion (Hicks, 2003). While Hicks describes the behaviors that express respectful pluralism, no studies have yet examined the internal narratives of such a leader, or the process whereby a leader develops such an attitude. That is the context in which the present study was done.

Purpose Statement

The central purpose of this qualitative study is to understand openness to religious diversity among leadership students who are religious. The research question this study hopes to

answer is: How do leadership students who are religious experience openness to religious diversity? Additional questions to be explored include: How do leadership students who are religious react when encountering a religion different from their own? Is their approach to religious difference distinct from their approach to cultural differences? How do they understand the development of those abilities in their own life?

It is hoped that this exploration will yield clues that will guide future research into how leaders learn to effectively negotiate religious and spiritual differences. This research has great significance for researchers and trainers in religious diversity. The findings may also be instructive to researchers in the field of intercultural diversity as they attempt to understand how personal beliefs might influence leader behaviors concerning diversity. And lastly, the findings may be useful to leaders themselves, particularly those who wish to change their approach to religious diversity. Hearing the stories of others may give them new insight into the possible ways of approaching religious belief different from their own.

Relevant Literature

In order to lay the groundwork for this study, we must first briefly review the literature on two topics relevant to this research question: spirituality and religion, and intercultural sensitivity.

Spirituality and Religion

The literature on spirituality and religion lacks a consensus on the difference, if any, between spirituality and religion. Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, et al. (2000) conducted an extensive examination of the diversity of perspectives on those two terms. Fry (2003) argued that spirituality is necessary for religion, but religion is not necessary for spirituality. Others have attempted to demonstrate that definition may be dependent on the audience. Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, et al. (1997) found general support for the idea that “spirituality” references the individual experience with the transcendent, while “religion” refers to institutional theology and rituals. More importantly, they found that the desire to differentiate between the two is less prevalent among those who are highly religious. Those who identified themselves as spiritual but not religious saw less overlap in the terms (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, et al., 1997).

The central question in this study concerns the openness of leadership students who are religious. Relying on the findings of Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, et al. (1997), differentiating between spirituality and leadership is not likely to be an important distinction for this population. Participants were purposefully selected from those who would describe themselves as religious, and they were asked about their religious perspectives during the interview. Thus the only distinctions between spirituality and religion relevant to the current study are those made by the participants. For this reason this study does not attempt to define the terms spiritual or religious, and looks instead to the participants to understand the significance of those terms for them.

Intercultural Sensitivity

The research question posed in this study concerns the openness of religiously oriented leadership students to religious diversity. In order to effectively study this phenomenon, we must first have a way of identifying students who meet that criterion. While openness to religious diversity is identified in the literature as the preferred leader attitude, prior literature has not provided a method for measuring such openness. In response, this study used a general measure of intercultural sensitivity to select individuals open to intercultural difference. The use of an instrument measuring intercultural competence in the examination of openness to religious diversity is one of the unique contributions of this study to the field of spirituality and leadership.

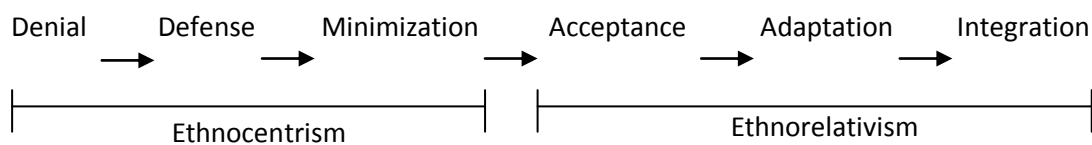
One of the leading theories on intercultural sensitivity, the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS), suggests there is a predictable developmental process whereby individuals develop the capacity to recognize and appreciate cultural differences (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The development of intercultural competence progresses from what Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman call “ethnocentric” to “ethnorelative” stages. In the ethnocentric stages individuals tend to experience their own culture as central. This contrasts with ethnorelativism in which one’s own culture is experienced in the context of others (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). An individual’s intercultural sensitivity is measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), used regularly in leadership development programs and diversity trainings.

Though the IDI measures several sub-stages of development, three broad stages are relevant to the purposes of this study: defense/denial, minimization, and acceptance/adaptation. Defense/denial is a form of ethnocentrism in which cultural differences are either denied to exist, or else seen as threats to be resisted. Examples of this would include a refusal to acknowledge cultural difference, or the negative stereotyping of another culture (Bennett, 1993).

Minimization, also a form of ethnocentrism, takes a different posture toward cultural difference. Rather than ignoring or resisting difference, all cultural differences are erased in the name of universality. This claim of universality can be about physical attributes or belief systems, but the basic assertion is that all people are fundamentally the same. While this may appear to be a desirable assertion, it nevertheless overlooks legitimate cultural distinctions and tends to reduce other cultures to a commonality consistent with one’s own culture. For this reason, minimization is still a form of ethnocentrism (Bennett, 1993; Hammer, Bennett, Wiseman, 2003).

Lastly, acceptance /adaptation is the stage in which individuals can both acknowledge and respect cultural differences. This begins first with a respect for behavioral differences, and later a respect for differing values. Ultimately this stage results in a pluralistic outlook, or the ability to internalize another cultural world view or identify with multiple cultures (Bennett, 1993). The progression of these stages from ethnocentric to ethnorelative is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity



(Hammer, Bennett, Wiseman, 2003)

The DMIS has the potential to be useful in the examination of religious and spiritual diversity because it assesses the individual's capacity to recognize and appreciate difference. This ability echoes Hicks' (2002) call for leaders able to effectively negotiate religious and spiritual difference, suggesting the IDI may be a useful instrument in measuring a leader's capacity to acknowledge and appreciate difference.

While the IDI is a useful tool to the current research question, the primary data collection method in this study is qualitative interviewing. This is true for two reasons. First, the IDI does not expressly measure participants' capacity to recognize and appreciate religious differences. Rather, its measure relates more generally to culture. Since the research question concerns religious difference specifically, qualitative interviews are required to fully understand the perspective of the research participants. Second, the IDI measures only the capacity to differentiate and appreciate cultural difference, not actual behavior. It is possible that an individual may choose to behave differently when faced with a specific situation. It is the participant's own description of the choices they make and the way they understand those choices that is most important to this study. While the IDI may give some indication of a leader's capacity, that leader's actual behavior when confronted with religious differences cannot be predicted with the IDI.

Prior research has demonstrated the importance of this distinction between developmental capacity and chosen behavior in matters of a religious nature. Prancer, Jackson, Hunsberger, & Pratt (1995) sought to study the complexity of thought in individuals with orthodox or fundamental religious beliefs. They defined complexity of thought as the ability to recognize the validity of more than one point of view on an issue. The study found that individuals who were high in orthodox or fundamental religious beliefs thought less complexly about religious issues. Yet there was no reduction in complex thought for those same individuals when considering non-religious issues (Prancer, Jackson, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 1995).

While Prancer, Jackson, Hunsberger, and Pratt's (1995) work supports the notion that religious ideas may be handled differently, it should not be read as a supposition that intercultural competence will be diminished for leaders who are religious. Rather, it is cited to support the idea that individuals may have distinct ways of approaching cultural difference when it is of a religious nature. The aim of this study is to explore that possibility by allowing participants to speak for themselves.

This distinction between capacity and behavior is further supported by this researcher's personal experience. While assisting with individual IDI interpretation sessions in a leadership development program, the issue of religion came up multiple times. The reason participants raised the topic was not clear, but it appeared that for those leaders, their openness to cultural difference was in some way connected with their religious belief. It was this experience, in part, that led to the current research design. It is hoped that qualitative interviews will allow leaders to explain this phenomenon in their own words, and allow the reader to understand the experience of openness to religious diversity among religiously oriented leadership students.

Research Paradigm

In qualitative inquiry, the research paradigm of the researcher can shape the methodology and interpretation of complex participant experiences, and thus should be disclosed by the researcher (Hatch, 2002). The importance of such a disclosure will become even more relevant

below since the participants themselves approach the research question with differing ontological assumptions. For the purposes of this research study, this researcher has attempted to assume a postpositivist orientation. Accordingly, the researcher's role is to look for patterns and attempt to make sense of the data, recognizing that the final product will only be an approximation of reality. This research posture is evident in the research design which uses a quantitative data collection instrument, and in some of the more directive interview questions.

Methods

The research question at hand is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand the personal religious perspectives of participants. For that reason, a qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study. Participants were purposefully chosen from students and graduates in an educational program in leadership at a Midwestern state university. With the assistance of a professor who taught a course in diversity and leadership, potential participants were identified who both held religious convictions and were interculturally sensitive. The definition of "religious conviction" was left entirely up to the participants, and participants expressed belief ranging from denominational membership to broader, spiritual beliefs. This researcher chose not to define religious belief for participants since the exact nature of the belief system was less important to this study than the existence of religious belief. Therefore, if participants thought they had religious beliefs, then their experiences were relevant to the study.

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board, invitations were extended to three potential participants, all of whom agreed to participate. The inclusion criteria were that all participants complete the IDI scoring above defense/denial, and self-identified themselves as someone having religious convictions. The only benefit to the participants was receiving copies of their scores on the IDI, which all had completed previously.

Participants were chosen to provide maximal variation. Demographically, two were male and one was female, and their age categories were 18-21, 31-40, and 41-50. In terms of IDI score, Participants 1 and 2 scored in acceptance and adaptation, and Participant 3 scored in minimization.

Data were collected through the paper version of the IDI, and through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The length of interviews ranged from 32 to 60 minutes. For the initial interview, an interview protocol sheet was used with 5 questions:

- In general, how do you think you react when you encounter a culture different from your own?
- You identified yourself as someone with religious convictions. How would you describe those convictions?
- Have you ever had an encounter with a religion different from your own? What can you tell me about that experience?
- In general, how do you think you react when presented with a religion different from your own?
- Do you think there is a difference in how you approach cultural or religious differences? If so, why do you think that is?

Based on the answers during the first interview, 5 additional questions were added to the interview protocol.

- What are your thoughts about “truth.”
- Do you see a difference between culture and religion?
- How did you come to hold your belief system?
- Are there ways in which you would like to change your approach to different religions?
- Have you traveled internationally? How has that affected your perspective on other religions?

In addition to audio recording, the interviewer took contemporaneous notes on an interview protocol sheet, and initial impressions were recorded following each interview.

Interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed by a student worker pursuant to a transcriptionist confidentiality agreement. Data analysis began by reading through the transcript in its entirety once transcription was completed. Coding was then conducted with the assistance of the data analysis software MAXqda. Memo’s were inserted wherever noteworthy quotes appeared. Data from the first interview yielded 25 codes, which grew to 43 codes with the analysis of the second interview. The codes were then grouped into related sub-codes. Eventually, the combining of related codes yielded 5 themes. These themes were then compared with the initial impressions recorded by the researcher to see if all key ideas had been incorporated. Using triangulation as a validation strategy, those themes were then tested for validity using the third interview. Data analysis of the third interview produced no new themes, and provided support for the themes as identified.

Researcher Reflexivity

Because qualitative research is an interpretive endeavor, researcher reflexivity is an important consideration. This researcher has many points of connection with the phenomenon under study, which is in large part why the issue is of interest. At one level, I approach the topic with an interest in religion. I have a master’s degree in religion and worked as a program developer for a Christian denomination for a period of time. I also approach the topic with an interest in religious diversity. I practiced law in the area of civil rights, including freedom of religion. I am also a mediator, and have a particular interest in how workplace conflicts are connected with individual beliefs and values. Lastly, I myself have taken a course in leadership and diversity and have attempted to increase my intercultural sensitivity in matters both cultural and religious. These experiences and interests drew me to this inquiry, and helped shape the research question and methodology.

There were two points during the execution of this study that researcher reflexivity became an active consideration. The first occurred during the first interview. I became aware after asking all of my prepared questions that there were still many question left unexplored. In essence, my understanding of the central phenomenon had shaped my questions, and I was at risk of failing to fully understand how the participant understood it. In response to this concern, I said, “...I want to hear more of what you are thinking. What am I not asking you that you wish I would ask you?” This question yielded more than 5 more pages of data, most of it in areas I

had not thought to ask about. From that experience I expanded the scope of my questions, and incorporated this final question into each interview.

The second time researcher reflexivity became an issue was during coding. After coding the first interview it became apparent that some of the codes could be sub-codes. Using MAXqda, I began to make those changes and the codes quickly combined to produce 5 categories or preliminary themes. When I began coding the second interview the codes were still in that format. After several attempts to code the second interview I began to feel some frustration that the data were not fitting into the categories as cleanly as I wanted. After taking a break I realized I had allowed my preliminary, and possibly premature structure to drive the coding of the second interview, thus depriving the second participant of an independent voice. I restored all sub-codes to codes, and removed any preliminary themes. The codes assigned to that second interview introduced new data, and ultimately resulted in themes very different from those initially reached.

Ethical Issues

The primary ethical concern raised in this study was from confidential information shared by participants. In each interview information was shared that might identify the individual for some readers. In some instances, that identifying information is contained in material that is substantively relevant to this study. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the individuals, every effort was made to redact the identifying information when possible. In those instances where redaction was not possible, the decision was made not to use that information in the paper.

Findings

After coding all three interviews, the following six themes emerged from the data: *curiosity, clarifying boundaries, broadening my view, inner struggle, relationship is more important, and not there yet*. Each of these themes is described and illustrated by quotes from participants below.

Curiosity

The starting point for each interview was a discussion of their thoughts on encountering someone from a different culture. Consistent with their scores on the IDI, each participant described the experience of encountering a new culture as “exciting.”

- “I’m incredibly curious by nature, and so if it’s someone with a different culture then I’m always curious to learn more about them.”
- “What was your childhood like, what do you believe, what do you believe that’s different?”
- “I have an insatiable need for new knowledge and new things and new experiences.”
- “I kind of want to see, you know, does it play out what I have read, what I have heard.”

Describing his interaction with the young Islamic woman found in the introduction, Participant 1 said, “I could just sense that she was really unsure of herself, but I myself was very intrigued and wanting to see that play out and have a great interaction between our two faiths.”

Clarifying Boundaries

The creation and clarification of boundaries was a precursor to the discussion of culture and religion for each participant. While the precise boundary was different for each, clarifying some boundary was a necessary first step for them all. For Participant 3, culture was seen as an “umbrella that encompasses religion.” However curiosity about cultural differences changed for Participant 3 when the topic was religious in nature.

To me religion has an even deeper emotional tie and obviously spiritual tie than culture’s overall umbrella.... I can take this culture and be a part of it and embrace it and everything about- or, you know, almost everything about culture. Versus- I think instinctively- I don’t like it, but I still have embedded in me an aspect that- a tendency to think I’m absolutely right and I am the only right one. And so then I don’t, I don’t think I’m quite as much um, I don’t want to say embracing of- of other religions as other cultures. So let’s say for instance if I were going to a Jewish um, you know, some kind of a Jewish service. I don’t think that I would be quite as easy going and carefree as if I were to go to a Chinese New Year celebration.

For Participant 2, the important boundary was between religion and spirituality. He saw religion as a “consistent set of practices, consistent set of holidays or feast days or perhaps a consistent set of ways that you pray.” Spirituality, on the other hand, was seen as the larger effort to be in touch with one’s spiritual self. As he described it, “the spiritual, I think, to me means being in touch with your spirituality, and religious conviction is about how you practice that in a consistent way.” That distinction was important to him because he saw religion as “bounded” spirituality, and himself as only “episodically religious.” Thus the boundary between spirituality and religion was something to which he consciously attended, and was the starting point before addressing culture and religion.

For Participant 1, there was no boundary between culture and religion, which were instead seen as intertwined. However, there was an important boundary between “cultural idioms,” or traditions, and “moral values.” Moral values were seen as stemming from faith, and are thus “hard to divorce” from religion. Moral values “may not be specific to a religion, but it still comes down to a moral value of... what a human life should represent, or a view of honesty, or a view of integrity” For him, the boundary between moral values and cultural traditions represented a line of importance. “You know, if the cultural difference is, uh, I don’t give eye contact because that is a sign of disrespect, I would minimize that and say you know that’s fine.”

Broadening My View

Each participant described a challenge to their belief structure that caused a change in their perspective. Two of them described this challenge in the form of a relationship.

“I came from an extremely conservative agriculturally related, Southern Baptist home and, I was- my freshman roommate was an Atheist, bisexual, vegetarian, [from another state]. And we became great friends.” Through conversations about religion, Participant 3 “learn[ed] from her in the way that she viewed other religions.”

Participant 2 described challenge from his mother as he was growing up. “I had some really strong beliefs in childhood that went against my family beliefs, and my mother thought that was okay- was okay for her. And I don’t know why it was, but it just was.” “My mother loved Native American culture.... She was constantly seeking out experiences with Native

American culture and so that taught me that- that difference was something to be explored. It wasn't difference is deficient. Difference is new, difference is interesting, different is- is- adds something to your life."

Two participants also described being challenged by "being removed from my culture" during international travel. Participant 1 credited international travel with "broadening [my] view of culture," specifically in regard to materialism. "Our tree gets shaken pretty good when we see what people are living with... outside of this country." "I did come back different to the point of almost scaring me and my family a little bit. It was- everybody had to adjust to the new [me]."

Participant 2 saw how international travel pointed out "the surprises, the assumptions." "I was not fun to be around in Junior High and High School because my perspective was the right way, my perspective was complete, it was everybody else's that wasn't." International travel "started creating the idea that my perspective is incomplete."

Inner Struggle

Despite their fascination with other cultures, engaging with other religions produced some sort of an inner struggle for each of the participants. For some this conflict came in the form of competing internal expectations. Participant 3 described this tension in this way.

I don't like it, but I still have embedded in me an aspect that- a tendency to think I'm absolutely right and I am the only right one." "It's like I want to be very embracing of people and- and embrace people as they are no matter what their religion is. And- and I want to embrace these other cultures. But at the same time, like I said there is still this, like, remaining belief that- that, um, there is one way.... And so I guess I'm kind of contradicting myself in everything that- (laughs). I say that I want to embrace these people and learn about it, but in the end I do believe that- that there is one truth.

When asked if this contradiction was something she was consciously aware of, Participant 3 said, "I don't think about it, um, all the time, but yes I'm aware of it." Thus, for Participant 3, the internal conflict seems to be experienced as a choice between two right options.

Participant 1 described a similar inner conflict when faced with a religion different from his own. "I want to be respectful, but I think I'm also wanting to really define the differences. I want to contrast and- and I think that might be something I need to work on. I think there's value to looking to what are the similarities as well, and I won't head to that as quickly."

The inner conflict of Participant 1 is most clearly expressed in his thoughts on offense. "You know in the Muslim faith they don't give the deity to Jesus Christ and truly that should be offensive to me." When asked to talk more about what he meant by "should be offensive to me," he said this.

I think God is offended by- by not respecting his son. In my faith system that's it, you know. Jesus Christ is everything about who God is. And if I'm going to follow my faith seriously I've got to hold that up as a huge priority. And if I start to diminish that then I'm diminishing my own faith. And so, so I-I might wrestle with the word, but I think it is true that- that the God I serve is offended by those who won't accept his son who he sent to die for all of us. So that should be offensive. But it doesn't mean I have to respond

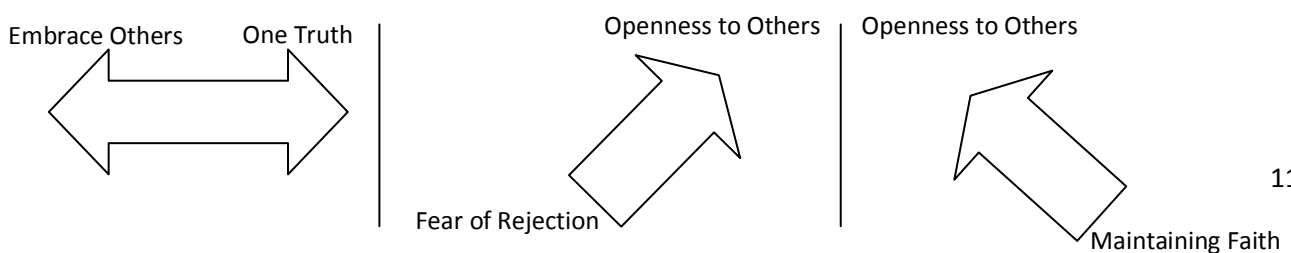
offensively, you know, that I have to respond with anger, or uh.... But, it's still probably an important distinction that I hold to if I'm gonna, if I'm gonna stay true to my own faith.

While the sense of inner conflict was expressed by all of the participants, the nature of the conflict was different for each. For Participant 1, the conflict was between personal faith and playing the role of judge. He described his faith as "my standard for life." Yet the presence of that standard was also something about which he was conflicted. "[If] I want to live my life in what would be considered a good, reasonable way I have to have a value system in place. Some measure of what good is. And I struggle with that because I'm then the judge of what's good." Talking more specifically about the nature of his faith, he said, "what I believe is the faith that I follow, so that would be God and his written word, as given to us in the Bible. So I do hold that up very strongly as faith and that's when that can sure conflict with those who disagree." So for Participant 1 the conflict seems to be a tension between his own beliefs or standards for living, and a sense that he should not be the judge of what is good.

In contrast, the struggle described by Participant 2 has a different feel to it. He described learning to see another person's disability not as something wrong, but rather by saying, "Oh he just does it differently." This led him to the realization that "...it was my inability- I had the disability to not be able to integrate and make space for him." "And so if you apply that to religion then my- I have a disability then. It's my disability if I can't make space for different religions and different practices and different viewpoints." This perspective was brought full circle when he discussed his tendencies when encountering someone religiously different from himself. "At first I'm cautious. Because my past experience is- is that, um, often people when they come together in a shared experience from a religious perspective it's an either/ or, that you're either with us or you're against us.... *the* truth becomes *our* truth.... I'm cautious and I'm like where's this person at, um do they have set boundaries? And will I ultimately be hurt by being rejected in some way? Will my ideas be belittled?" So for Participant 2 the inner conflict is between a personal acceptance of responsibility for accepting the religious beliefs of others, and a hesitation to engage others in religious discussion out of a fear of rejection.

These three stories present a rich, complex picture of the inner thoughts of leadership students concerning religious and spiritual diversity. While each is distinct, their descriptions almost evoke a visual image. Participant 3 describes a "both are right" struggle, leaving the reader to imagine the speaker stuck in the middle while pulled in two directions. In contrast, the latter two seem to describe a struggle that is directional, with the primary resistance from coming from within. In this way, the description of their struggle evokes an image of leaning; forward momentum resisted by an internal tether. One describes struggling to remain open to others without compromising his own faith. Another is struggling to remain open to others while risking personal rejection (see Figure 2). If we imagine the latter two struggles leaning in the direction of each other, we can begin to see the next theme at work.

Figure 2: Images of Inner Struggle



Relationship is More Important

Relationship with others seemed to play a central role in the religious beliefs of each participant. "...Just as much as I'm pursuing my relationship with God because he made it there first, it makes me hungry to have a relationship with other people too." This desire to connect with others seems to be an expression of priority – people above principle. "I am learning that relationship is more important than fighting over those issues."

For two of the participants, the importance of relationship was expressed in the way they had modified or adapted their roles to maintain the priority of relationships.

[In the past] I thought "I'm right, and I need to convince them... that what they believe is wrong." But as I've grown and developed I've definitely come at conversations with people of different religions as much more of just that- as a conversation, and not trying to persuade them... [J]ust getting to know that person and understanding where they're coming from....

Giving relationship a high priority seemed for Participant 1 to be a deliberate act, in spite of differences in belief. "[T]his is an area where if I really follow my faith I cannot go in agreement with that faith. But should I make that then stop our relationship? Absolutely not." Concerning a very contentious topic, Participant 1 said, "I do believe God is going to deal with this better than I can. I will share my perspective to the students but I'll try to do it humbly and with a bunch of mercy behind it...." In this way, it appears that Participant 1 is attempting to acknowledge difference, while adopting a role of relationship builder rather than arbiter.

However, the definition of role can also at times stand in the way of a relationship. Participant 3 described what she would likely do when relationship and personal belief came into conflict.

"I'll back out from a conversation if I'm talking about religion to a friend ... and I can sense that they start to get uncomfortable... I'll know in my head then, okay this is what I think and I would love for them to believe this, but I don't want to offend them and I don't want to turn them away so I'll probably change the subject ..."

Similarly, Participant 2 was cautious about engaging in religious conversations, despite enjoying them. "[A]t first I'm cautious. Because my past experience is that, often people when they come together in a shared experience from a religious perspective, it's an either or, that you're either with us or you're against us."

Not There Yet

Despite all the differences in how they approached religious diversity, there was one conviction shared by all three participants: a belief that they were not where they wanted to be

yet. In the words of Participant 3, “I just wish that I could look at other people’s religion more with a, with an open mind.... I’m a pretty open and embracing person and I am like that, but ... when it comes to religion I probably get a little bit more, I don’t know, what’s the word, (pause) maybe wary.... As we talk about this it makes me realize how much more I have to develop in my convictions”

For Participant 1, there was a desire to work on what was perceived as arrogance or egocentrism. “I’m, just not there yet and I need to continue to see how I get in the way of myself.” For Participant 2, it was the hesitation experienced when talking with others about religion. “I’m still timid.... Perhaps my reaction puts them off because I hold cautiously back and so it- it doesn’t bridge that gap. So if I was going to change my behavior then I would try to be more authentic.”

Discussion

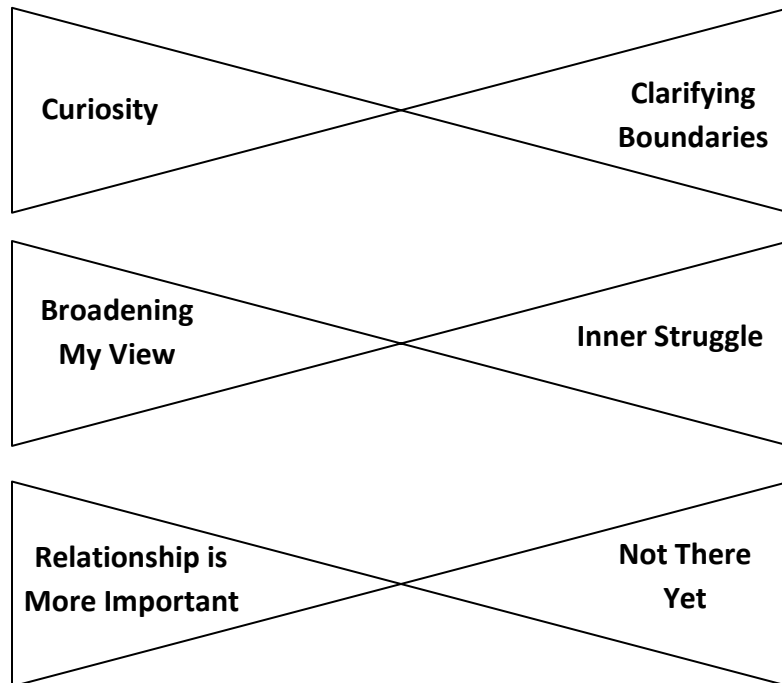
This study sought to explore openness to religious diversity among leadership students who were religious, with a specific objective of allowing participants to tell explain that phenomenon in their own words. The themes above reveal a complex and sometimes conflicted story of individuals trying to be open in their own way. To make meaning of these findings, we will first discuss the interrelationship of the themes, and then we will examine the implications of these findings for the field of spirituality and leadership.

Interrelationship of Themes

Despite expressing a wide array of beliefs, these three interculturally sensitive leadership students had distinct similarities in the way they described their religious beliefs. These themes paint a picture of the journey and inner dialogue of interculturally sensitive individuals as they encounter religious diversity. However, when taken as a whole, the relationship between these themes presents an even richer picture of the participant’s openness to religious diversity.

Each theme is an important part of understanding the experience of these participants. However, when viewed in order, the progression of the themes themselves begins to present a unique picture of these student’s experience with religious diversity. The themes have the feel of an internal debate, progressing forward in almost point/counterpoint fashion. *Curiosity/clarifying boundaries. Broadening my view/ Inner Conflict. Relationship is more important/ I’m not there yet.* Furthermore, viewing the themes in this way produces a pairing of themes. While the later theme in each pair could be seen as an exception or limitation to the prior, this researcher believes it would be more faithful to the transcripts to view them as the other side of the same issue. This progression of connected themes is depicted visually in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Progression of Themes



Seen together in this way, the themes paint a picture of a growing, changing, sometimes conflicted process whereby leadership students encounter religious diversity.

Implications

The implications of this study are multifaceted for the fields of both spirituality and leadership, and diversity. However, for our purposes here, two important implications will be emphasized: perceptions of truth, and usefulness of the IDI.

Perceptions of truth. Two distinct attitudes toward truth were expressed by participants in this study. Moreover, their thoughts on openness to religious diversity seemed to parallel their thoughts on truth. “I used to think that... truth with a capital T was somewhere out there to be discovered. I just hadn’t read the right book, talked to the right person. Now I think... truth capital T isn’t discovered- it’s created, and it’s co-created by lots of different things.” In contrast, another participant said, “I think there is an absolute truth and I think there are universal truths that every culture should be able to hold up and adhere to. I will admit that none of us adhere to that sufficiently, but just because of that, then to deny it’s not there is- I think we’re all fooling ourselves.”

The observation that participants seem to be operating under different understandings of truth raises important research and practice implications for the field of spirituality and leadership. How can the field of leadership and spirituality assist in the development of Hick’s (2003) “respectful pluralism” without simultaneously endorsing one conception of truth? Stated another way, doesn’t the imposition of relativism on those who hold “truth with a capital T” run contrary to the underlying purpose of religious plurality?

The insights found in the stories of these participants may provide glimpses of more than one way to be open to religious diversity. In particular, it is noteworthy that the two subjects who scored in the acceptance/adaptation range on the IDI, and who spoke most freely about their openness to religious diversity, simultaneously disagreed about the nature of truth. Understanding more about these different approaches to openness could be very instructive to the field of spirituality and leadership.

While this specific question has not been studied before, there has been at least one prior conceptual work on the role of religious belief in strategic leadership. Worden (2005) argued that a strategic leader's attitude about truth (absolutist or relativist), and his or her normative attitude or moral stance (evangelical or pluralist) combined to produce four possible stances toward moral truth. According to Worden, evangelical absolutism is likely to have the greatest likelihood of applying his or her own faith in the exercise of strategic leadership. Logically, pluralist relativism would be most open to a diversity of religious expressions. Absolutist pluralism, as Worden calls it, represents a "middle ground" in which "a theologically-driven leader may be more willing to moderate the use of his religion because he views it as only one of many truths and out of respect for the validity of other faiths practiced by his followers" (Worden, 2005, p. 232). This attitude of openness to other religions, coupled with a strongly held personal conviction, is consistent with the story shared by Participant 1 in the introduction. However, rather than calling this a "middle ground," it may be more descriptive to call it "another path to openness."

Looking at the present findings through Worden's (2005) typology is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it provides at least preliminary empirical support to Worden's assertion that the behavior of leaders is influenced by their theological and normative attitudes. While the current study has only three subjects, we can begin to see in their stories examples of Worden's premise in practice. However, Worden typology treats those theological and normative attitudes as static. In contrast, the participants in this study describe how their beliefs changed over time. Their stories, together with their scores on the IDI, begin to illustrate a developmental process whereby people of differing theological and normative orientations can reach a place of openness via differing paths. That may be the most significant finding in this study for the field of spirituality and leadership, and present the greatest opportunities for future research.

Usefulness of the IDI. Additionally, this study illustrated that a participant's openness to religious diversity at least partially parallels that participant's intercultural development, as measured by the IDI. This finding offers preliminary support for the notion that openness to religious diversity is a developmental capacity. This insight is a unique contribution of this study, and suggests that the IDI may have potential for use in future research and developmental interventions on the topic of religious diversity.

However, the usefulness of the IDI to measure openness to religious difference is tempered by the fact that at least one participant saw religious diversity as distinct from cultural diversity. As quoted above, Participant 3 said, "...if I were going to... some kind of a Jewish service... I don't think that I would be quite as easy going and carefree as if I were to go to a Chinese New Year celebration." This seems to support Prancer, Jackson, Hunsberger, and Pratt's (1995) conclusion that individuals who are religious may treat topics of a religious nature different from non-religious topics. Accordingly, additional research may need to be done to

identify whether the IDI can be useful in a limited role, or whether it could be adapted to be used specifically for matters of religious diversity.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study that point to future research possibilities. The first is the sample size and sampling method. These three participants were chosen because of their participation in an educational leadership program that addressed diversity. Based on what was found in this study, an expanded study with more participants from more varied settings appears promising. A larger sample might reveal that these participants are representative of a larger collection of perspectives.

Another limitation connected to the sample was the IDI scores of the participants. Studying participants in different stages of intercultural development provided a deeper picture of the inner thoughts of leadership students open to religious diversity. However, it may have also confounded efforts to find common themes. The complexity evident in this small sample of three highlights the need for a more detailed examination of the approach to religious diversity in each IDI stage. Future studies might sample purposefully based on criteria such as IDI score or attitudes about truth, and analyze the data for themes within those subgroups. Such an approach may reveal sub-themes or contrary evidence lost in the present analysis, and could help paint a fuller picture of the multiple paths to openness for leaders who are religious.

An additional limitation of the current study is that all participants were either currently Christian or raised Christian. That was not a requirement of the research question, but rather an inadvertent product of a purposive sample that was also a convenience sample. Future research should either clarify that the research question concerns only Christian religious belief, or expand the sample to include other religious perspectives. This would avoid the suggestion that Christian beliefs are representative of all religions. Ultimately, research in this area would benefit from a sample that included more than Christian perspectives.

Conclusion

Taken together, these observations suggest further research should be structured to hear the experiences and perspectives of individuals in each stage of intercultural development, with specific attention to the question of truth. Such an examination would extend the findings of the current work on the experience of religious and spiritual belief, and add additional insight into the multiple ways leaders may be open to religious diversity. Extending the research in this direction will be an important next step as researchers move toward an understanding of how leaders learn to effectively negotiate religious diversity.

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