

Spiritual & Religious Diversity in Social Work

Clint A. Wilson, Huntington University

Social Work Practice I (SWX325-(EX17)-X1, FA-2017-UNDG)

Spiritual & Religious Diversity in Social Work

### Spiritual & Religious Diversity in Social Work

“Most multicultural groups in the United States have encountered some level of prejudice and discrimination in dealing with various societal institutions, including social services agencies” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, Jr., 2011, p. 443). It is almost shameful that any level of prejudice or discrimination exists in this world, but it is part of human nature we all have our levels of prejudice rather we want to admit it or not. That level of bias may not be due to skin color, belief, or religion, it may be something altogether, but typically it will stem from some ignorance.

I was curious about the technical definition of cultural diversity and according to dictionary.com cultural diversity is the existence of a variety of cultural or ethnic groups within a society. I like the word variety in that statement; it seems with in our culture that is the only place people do not want variety. They want a variety of cereals to choose from, a variety of cars, a variety of movies, but not people. The question as to why lingers in my mind.

A social worker may have needs to work with different cultures, religions, and spiritual beliefs. To put aside our own beliefs so that we can focus on the needs of the clients is of utmost importance regardless if they are Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or any of the several religions and cultures that exist in our world.

When I first heard about this trip, I was a bit uneasy. I did not know what to expect. I think my feelings were to expect to be looked down upon for having different beliefs. The irony is that most people of other faith and cultures probably feel the same way about American Christians.

Since both my congregation and myself have always been advocates for diversity not only against cultural, spiritual, or religious differences but with gender roles and sexual preferences. It was great enjoyment that I was on this trip, and even today I am reliving moments of this life changing experience. I was excited to write a paper on this experience and article for our denominational and congregational newsletters.

I felt anxious as we came to the first group, the Christians from the Hindu culture. It was strange to me to have to take my shoes off as soon as I entered the home. I wonder how much of that is to the fact that we don't allow our students to go without shoes except when it is room time. The atmosphere was energetic but subtle; the incense was quite strong, but not pungent. I was apprehensive when they started with the chants and felt out of place as I tried to keep up in the book. It was refreshing to see the father and his interaction with his son the same type of interaction my dad at one time had with me. This interaction was an unintentional outward showing of we are no different than you or anyone else. I left there wanting more, almost a longing to further the experience as I felt the spirit.

The Mosque was one part of the trip I wasn't too concerned with as I have been involved with the mosque in Fort Wayne through our church. However, seeing as this was Chicago, the atmosphere was different. I was taken back when I saw the armed officer standing outside the mosque. Meeting with Umar the gentleman that ran the Islamic Reading Room, was delightful I guess I expected more of a defensive stance on their beliefs and an agenda of conversion of us. The other group in Fort Wayne had no sit-down and discussed views; it was just sitting in on a service. The actual service I found quite strange at first as people were milling around and coming and going. When the speaker was changing from English too, I think Arabic made it hard

to follow parts of the service. Once again the people were very accommodating and open to outsiders being in their presence.

As we were walking around and visiting with the people at JPUSA, I had a weird vibe at one point and for some reason pictured Manson and his followers. However, somewhere along the way that feeling changed and I felt as wow these people get it, these people love God and understand what it means to pick up their cross and go. Once we watched the horrible long video, I realized that looks could be deceiving and so called Christians can also commit heinous acts. That video has a significant impact on me, and I could not sleep that night until I had more answers which I was able to obtain. Thinking about it still, gives me a sickening feeling, and to know that I supported them back in the 80s without realizing it, causes me grief.

The Hare Krishnas was quite an interesting experience, as I knew absolutely nothing about their faith or belief. Once I found it was derived from Hinduism I was able to understand slightly more. As I read through the propaganda that was given to us, a statement stood out to me. “I came to find that there was a striking similarity in the essence of what they were teaching and in the original core of Christianity—that is, living simply, not trying to accumulate worldly goods, living with compassion toward all creatures, sharing, loving, and living joyfully” (dasi, 2016, p. 4). How can a religion so vastly different from Christianity make a comparison to Christianity?

The core tenant of Christianity is love; everything revolves around love. So that would be the only correlation between Hare Krishnas and Christians. However, I also have an issue with the statement “living simply, not trying to accumulate worldly goods” (dasi, 2016, p.4). Looking around their place of worship it was far from simple; it was elaborate, and beautiful if I am to be truthful. I do however recognize the intended purpose of those statements is for the person and

not their place of worship. If you take Christian church lets say a Mega Church and they begin to preach about being humble, not having worldly goods, and to live a simple life, they would be considered by many to be hypocrites.

I am still doing some research on all of these religions and beliefs that we visited that day, to understand more. I have also decided I want to know more about all of the major religions of the world.

There is one common thing I saw with the three religious groups in their services. None of them was sitting in chairs, they all were either standing or bowing to God. They all put themselves at the lowest point, they all were very passionate and deliberate in the way they worshipped. Us as Christians can take something from this, maybe not the daily rituals, but the devotion the dedication. I ask why not the daily services?

Growing up as a new Christian in the Southern Baptist faith and living in Alabama for so many years. I learned to shun people who were not like us; I saw it happen in what used to be my church. I imagine it was like that in the sixties as a group of young black men was asked to leave the church one Sunday morning. A few of us walked out with them, and since that church is no longer around. It took awhile to learn and retrain my mind to be open, but now I am fully open to everyone and every belief.

I served as a youth pastor for awhile in a church down in the south. I remember being cautioned about what youth I brought in. I was reminded that blacks would not be welcomed, I was reminded that people from the wrong side of the tracks need not be there. I was reminded that people never change and that I was being watched cause I was still an addict. These people could not see past their selves to see the actual message of love from our God. These are the

same individuals who take the 1611 King James to be the only Bible and take it literally and say it contains no allegory, metaphors, or the like. The same people who most do not even know Song of Songs exist in the bible cause they don't teach it or talk about it out of fear is my guess. The point in all of this is to show where I was at one time, and where I am now.

“Respecting diversity and demonstrating value clarity and reflectivity are crucial ingredients for identifying strengths and empowering action” (Canda & Furman, 2009, p. 611). How do we as social workers respect other peoples belief systems without infringing on our own so that we can empower those of different faiths? I feel this can be hard to do; I think everyone would say that this is easy to do. However, when we get right down into it, we may find it difficult. I think the biggest thing that helps me to respect diversity, in general, has been my work in the Church of the Brethren. I entered the denomination very conservative, but somewhere I transformed and became very progressive, even too progressive for some liberal members at times. I learned to see everyone as a person, a gift from God to this planet, regardless of faith or belief. This belief has caused some disconnect with people I once considered friends, but I stand by my views and my beliefs. I refuse to change my views, and if someone wants to ostracize me for that, then I say have it, God will deal with you later in his own time.

It is tough to put aside cultural differences and to look at the person I am speaking with openly and not to be judging them based on their beliefs or even their appearance. Just the other day I saw a man with facial tattoos, and I thought why? What possessed someone to do that, this was a prejudice, and I judged this man. I see that now, and I look at myself and think why do I have tattoos? What makes me any better than him? Nothing makes me any better than him, he at his core is still a child of God. A person of a different faith is still a child of God. I have respect

for all beliefs so as far as they respect my own beliefs and do not try to push their agenda on to me as I will not do that to them.

“Although the social work profession has a proud tradition of celebrating diversity and inclusion, these topics remain contentious professional issues” (Hodge, 1997, p. 55). This statement goes along with our preconceived prejudices we all have. Social work is just that a profession whose goal is to serve and be a beacon of empowerment to everyone.

In summary, the trip challenged my thinking further. It reminded me that sometimes things are not as they appear. It reaffirmed my thought that we are all God’s people regardless of heritage or background. I felt every emotion during this trip; mostly it taught me to look at people for who they are not what they are.

## References

- Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. D. (2009). *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- dasi, devi V. (2016). *Master with a Mission. The Hare Krishanas Celebrating 50 Years.*, 64.
- Hodge, D. R. (1997). *Exploring the State of Religious Diversity.*
- Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Hull, Jr., G. H. (2011). *Understanding Generalist Practice* (Sixth). Belmont: Brooks Cole.