Blending Two Worlds: Religio-Spirituality in the Professional Lives of Student Affairs Administrators

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Student affairs administrators representing four types of institutions were interviewed to determine the role that religio-spirituality plays in their professional lives. Results reveal that most desire more freedom to express this aspect of their identity in that it has a salient impact in how they work with students. However, several reasons are given for the reluctance of many to freely express their religio-spirituality with their colleagues.

Introduction

“We actually learn how to keep productive, trusting company with one another by talking in good faith together about the things that we truly value with all of our minds and hearts.”

(Nash, 2001, p. 176)

Recently, spirituality and religion have become topics of extensive dialogue and discourse in student affairs. The aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 resulted in an increased realization by

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many student affairs professionals that spirituality and religion are salient in the lives of many students. Now, spirituality and religion have become the focus of many journal articles, conference presentations, and professional development activities in the profession of student affairs.

As a result of this increased emphasis, much stimulating dialogue has occurred regarding the differences between the concepts of spirituality and religion. Parker Palmer (2002) believes that spirituality is about our ultimate understanding of what is real in our lives; it is about exploring the larger questions of life. According to Palmer, spirituality is an “encounter with otherness” (1998, p. 5). Similarly, Royce-Davis and Stewart (2000) describe spirituality as “an internal phenomenon addressing issues such as the search for a sense of meaning and purpose in one’s life, establishment of an intrinsically held value system that determines behavior, and participation in a community of shared values” (p. 4). Spirituality is described by Sharon Parks (2000) as a personal search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, and “apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life” (p. 16). To go further, Senge (1999) believes that spirituality is the space, freedom, and safety to bring our whole beings to a particular context or situation.

On the other hand, Clark (2001) describes religion as “an organized set of doctrines around faith beliefs within an organization” (p. 38). These beliefs serve as moral guides and are usually concerned with issues surrounding the origins of life, right and wrong behavior, and assumptions about an afterlife. Organized religion is an outward, public process; spirituality is an internal, private one (Rogers & Dantley, 2001). An individual’s spirituality may be related to a particular religion, but that need not be the case; many spiritual people do not describe themselves as religious. Teadale (1999) believes that “when authentic faith embodies an individual’s spirituality, the religious and spiritual will coincide” (p. 17). Nash (2001) believes that religion and spirituality are “interchangeable parts of the same experience” (p. 18), and thus, prefers the use of the term “religio-spirituality” in his discourse. For the purposes of this study, the term “religio-spirituality” will be used to signify the distinct, yet sometimes overlapping, nature of the phenomenon under investigation; this conceptualization appears quite salient in the thoughts and stories shared by the respon-
dents. No specific religio-spiritual tradition (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity) was the focus of this study. Respondents spoke of the tradition that they themselves espoused.

Although higher education professionals are beginning to recognize the importance of supporting the religio-spiritual development of college and university students (e.g., Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Love & Talbot, 1999; Strange, 2000), they have rarely addressed religio-spirituality in the work lives of various professionals in higher education (Rogers & Dantley, 2001). Neck and Milliman (1994) believe that people have a desire to experience religio-spirituality in their work; they want to devote themselves to a higher purpose through their work. Moreover, in an organizational culture supportive of the religio-spiritual journey of the individual, the growth of the organization is enhanced (Allen & Kellom, 2001). On the contrary, however, if religio-spirituality is absent from the workplace, people become tired, fractured, and dissatisfied and begin to feel invisible (Senge, 1999). Work life has become so demanding, stressful, fast-paced, chaotic, and uncertain that people need to seek values-based answers and ways of achieving personal stability from within (Rogers & Dantley, 2001).

In spite of the growing amount of research about spirituality and religion in higher education, missing from the literature are the voices of student affairs administrators. Nash (2001) refers to these administrators as “hidden educators” in that “they represent a powerful, albeit hidden, educational force in the academy” (p. 7). Allen and Kellom (2001) believe that it is important to consider the religio-spirituality of student affairs staff due to its importance in helping these administrators survive personally and professionally in their demanding jobs. It is for this reason that we conducted this investigation. The research question that guided this study, which is part of a larger investigation, is as follows: What role does religio-spirituality play in the professional lives of student affairs administrators?

Method

Twenty-four student affairs administrators were chosen for the larger qualitative, phenomenological study of which this was a component.
Contact information for potential participants was obtained from institutional Web sites and/or divisional electronic email lists. Maximum variation, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to ensure the inclusion of administrators with varying levels of experience, representing both sexes, and representing various institutional types. The final sample consisted of five entry-level professionals, thirteen midlevel professionals, and six senior-level professionals. At the time of data collection, fifteen were working at a public, 4-year institution; four at a private, Jesuit institution; three at a private, Baptist-affiliated college; and two at a public, community college. Fifteen females and nine males were represented in the sample.

One open-ended, semistructured interview was conducted with each administrator. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour and was held in a quiet location, such as the administrator’s office. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In this narrative, pseudonyms for respondents and institutions are used to ensure anonymity.

We analyzed the data using Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) inductive method of qualitative data analysis. First of all, we unitized the data by searching for an element (phrase, sentence, or paragraph) that was heuristic, or “aimed at some understanding” that we, as inquirers, needed to have (p. 345). Once the data was unitized, units that related to the same content were grouped together into provisional categories. This categorization was achieved through the constant comparative method. In other words, units were compared to each other to establish whether they were similar and should be put in the same category, or different and should be put into different categories. As we unitized and categorized the data, we regularly met to discuss our analysis. From the categorized data, common themes that cut across variations in the data emerged. While many themes emerged in the larger project, only a portion of them are shared in this smaller project.

Jones (2002) warns qualitative researchers to check their own subjectivity and theoretical stance so that decisions are indeed rooted in the research process as it unfolds rather than in the researchers’ own point of view. We are drawn to spirituality and religion as areas of study due to the role that both have played in our lives. Though most research
involves a certain degree of intuitive interpretation, we tried to intentionally avoid relying upon the interpretations rooted in our own experiences as we analyzed the data. Trustworthiness of these findings was enhanced through member checking and peer debriefing. Member checks were conducted with each administrator to ensure accurate representation of their thoughts and experiences (Patton, 2002). Moreover, a graduate student served as a peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to review the categories and summative interpretations for clarification and suggestions. Lincoln and Guba describe peer debriefing as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (1985, p. 308).

Limitations of this study include the fact that the student affairs administrators in this study seemed to struggle with the conceptualization of religio-spirituality. Interestingly, their descriptions of how “spirituality” plays a role in their work were often manifestations of what many would call “religion.” It is likely that for many of these respondents, religion is the vehicle through which their spirituality is expressed. We do not feel that this is overly problematic in that the focus of this study was not on whether or not student affairs administrators accurately conceptualize religio-spirituality but rather on whether and how they believe they are free to express their own religio-spirituality, regardless of how it is conceptualized. Another limitation is that only one region of the nation, the Midwest, was represented in this study. The possibility exists that there are regional differences in regards to the expression of religio-spirituality among student affairs administrators. This does not make the conclusions less valid, just less generalizable. In spite of the limitations, the following themes presented as headings and subheadings within the findings are significant and worthy of reflection.

Findings

Desire for Religio-Spirituality in the Workplace

Throughout the interviews, several respondents spoke of the desire of some student affairs administrators to work with colleagues who are religio-spiritual. One student affairs administrator spoke of an experi-
ence in which she was interviewing candidates for a job. One of the candidates mentioned her desire to work with colleagues who are ethical and spiritual. In particular, her story illustrates the importance that many administrators place upon the religio-spirituality of their colleagues:

It’s interesting. People will have an interest in this institution . . . in working here. And, they’ll want to come and meet and talk about what we do. And, I’ve had situations where people have said, “It’s very important to me that people are ethical and spiritual in the way they do their work. How do you feel about that?” I find that to be very refreshing yet very courageous on their part. (Martha, program director of the Career Services Center)

Lisa, an assistant dean, shared the following story of a retreat that she led in which she incorporated religio-spirituality into discussions of leadership in higher education. This retreat was directed toward student affairs administrators in various functional areas of the institution:

I did a retreat at Western State [pseudonym for a public institution at which she used to work] with all of my staff, and we used “Leading with Soul.” [Bolman & Deal, 1995] And, we talked about spirituality in the workplace . . . how you become spiritual in the workforce and in the institution. They loved it! Part of it was because it was really a diverse group . . . from childcare workers to hall directors to career counselors. The book was like a common thread. And yet, it could be easily adapted to the level that every person wanted it to be. So, it was not threatening. It was very open and very personal reflection-based.

Lisa believes that many administrators enjoy discussing religio-spirituality and would like to have these types of dialogue sessions with their colleagues more frequently.

Role of Religio-Spirituality in the Workplace

When asked about the role that religio-spirituality plays in the context of their work, many student affairs administrators were eager to respond. Two subthemes emerged from the interviews: Religio-spirituality impacts the ways in which some student affairs staff support and encourage each other in tough times, and religio-spirituality pro-
vides a framework for the leadership styles and strategies of some administrators.

Support and Encouragement Among Staff
Many student affairs administrators shared stories of times in which religio-spirituality came to the forefront in their professional lives as a result of difficult life events. After September 11, 2001, for example, many student affairs administrators came together and expressed their religio-spirituality in an effort to bring comfort to themselves and to others:

We are all pretty spiritual and religious in this office. On September 11, I went next door to see one of the colleagues who works for me. I know she’s very religious. And, I said, “Let’s go pray.” All of a sudden, almost everyone in this office was in there. And, it’s a public university. It wasn’t like this big, “Let’s all get together and pray.” It just happened. (Gerald, manager of student services)

A student affairs administrator at a public, 2-year institution shared the following regarding the influence of religio-spirituality in difficult times:

We’ve had people have severe surgeries, for example, and we might have a prayer session in an office for that person. When I worked at Technology University [a pseudonym for a private, urban institution] and was going through this horrible problem with my marriage, several people that I worked with that knew about it asked to pray with me. And, all of us were from different faith backgrounds. But, it was very encouraging and powerful and made such a difference for me. And, they even gave me a book called “In the Arms of God.” And, there were days when I read that hour-by-hour . . . to get through what I was dealing with. And, that was a treasure. And now I’ve given that book to other people that I’ve worked with and said, “Here, borrow this for a while.” (Martha, program director of the career services center)

Joy, the director of graduate admissions at a private institution, has regularly had religio-spiritual experiences with her colleagues at work. She gave several examples during her interview:
Personally, I’ve attended mass with my colleagues. And, we’ve prayed together and we’ve cried together. And, we’ve gone through . . . deaths and other hard times in the community. There have been times when we’ve pulled together, or volunteered, or contributed in some special way to help each other out. Because it just seemed to be the right thing to do.

Leadership Styles and Strategies
Several administrators shared examples to support their opinions that religio-spirituality often impacts the leadership style used to do their work. In fact, Denise, an assistant vice-chancellor of student affairs, believes that “most of the best staff are deeply spiritual.” According to the student affairs administrators in this study, religio-spirituality shapes the development of relationship-building characteristics and values, the techniques and strategies used in their work, and their perceptions of and goals for students. Paula, a vice-chancellor of student affairs, believes that “it is appropriate to use spirituality as a frame of reference for your leadership style . . . as you would use a leadership book.”

Some student affairs administrators are impacted personally by their own religio-spirituality in such a way that leads them to develop and to display positive relationship-building characteristics and values. Many of the respondents believe that religio-spiritual administrators are able to “keep an open mind” and to “appreciate differences and accept people just the way they are.” Moreover, Adam, the manager of an apartment complex at an urban institution, stated that religio-spirituality provides the means by which to “have care and compassion for students.” According to other administrators, patience is another quality that is displayed as a result of religio-spirituality.

The techniques and strategies used by some student affairs administrators are often shaped by the religio-spirituality of those administrators. Jack, the director of minority student affairs at an urban, public institution shared the following about a technique that he uses:

The way that I operate oftentimes . . . I call it the preacher role. I had some great pastors as a child, and I even know some personally. And, I try to mimic a lot of their mannerisms. And, a lot of the young people who come in here can really connect with
the slow speech—emphasizing certain words. People tend to really cling to what you are saying. I’ve used mannerisms that make successful preachers, and I try to incorporate that in the same way when I deliver the messages to the students.

Other techniques and strategies were mentioned as well. “Providing encouragement to students” while also “helping them think about how their behavior affects others” is a way in which Lynn, an assistant director of student life, believes that her religio-spirituality impacts her leadership style. Patty, the director of student life and leadership development at a public, community college, stated that her religio-spirituality prevents her from “sweating the small stuff” while working with students. A “moral compass” was the way in which Denise, an assistant vice-chancellor of student affairs, described the way in which her religio-spirituality impacts the techniques and strategies used in the workplace. Gerald, a manager of student services in an academic unit at a public, 4-year institution stated that “spirituality guides who you are and what you do” and “plays a big role in how you handle difficult situations.”

Additionally, the religio-spirituality of some student affairs administrators shapes their views of students as well as the goals and desires that they hold for students. As a result of their religio-spirituality, administrators in this study often perceive students as “unique beings made by God” who have both strengths and weaknesses. The religio-spirituality of some student affairs administrators helps them to remember that “students’ problems are big deals in their eyes” and, thus, should be viewed “as big as our own [problems].” Success and self-awareness were the two most commonly stated goals and desires for students that exist as a result of the religio-spiritual beliefs of many administrators. Rebekah, a career counselor at a Jesuit institution, stated that her religio-spirituality gives her the desire to “want the students to do well.” Moreover, Joel, the coordinator of career services at a public institution, stated that his religio-spirituality guides him in “trying to help students see themselves better.”

Reluctance to Express Their Own Religio-Spirituality with their Colleagues

In spite of the positive impacts of religio-spirituality in the work of
many student affairs administrators, the subject of religio-spirituality is often described as being “taboo” in higher education in general and in student affairs administration in particular. One professional stated that this topic is a “hands-off” topic. Another professional stated that if and when this issue comes to the forefront in discussions among student affairs administrators, they are constantly “editing what they say.” According to the respondents in this study, this reluctance is due, at least in part, to three factors: fear, the desire to avoid controversy, and being thwarted in past attempts to express religio-spirituality.

**Fear Abounds**

For some student affairs administrators, the fear of being labeled or “pigeon-holed” is the main reason for their reluctance to share their religio-spiritual identity. Others stated that they fear being viewed suspiciously. Lisa, an assistant dean, shared an example of a time in which she was labeled and viewed suspiciously as a result of her religio-spiritual expression:

> I had a staff member who really challenged me about being Catholic and really thought that I would be really homophobic because of that. And nobody had ever said that to me before. I was shocked, and I was hurt. And, I was angry. I let people know about my Catholicism, but I do it through making jokes in that I’ll confess something that I did, and I’ll joke that that’s being Catholic in that I confess my sins to other people and stuff. But, I never really thought about how much I did that until he pointed that out. I had to work hard to convince him that that didn’t mean that . . . that I was a very strong advocate of GLBT issues. But, we had to really work through that.

Still, others believe that there are “student affairs acceptable answers” to things and that if they bring religio-spirituality to bear on an issue, they may offend someone and end up suffering some type of retribution. “The kiss of death” is the way in which one individual described the potential outcome of the free expression of religio-spirituality among student affairs administrators.

**Avoiding Controversy**

Many student affairs administrators expressed reluctance to discuss religio-spirituality at work due to the controversial nature underlying
these issues. In effect, many professionals in student affairs like to avoid conflict and tension if possible. A story was shared that exemplifies the controversial nature of the issues and provides an example of why some professionals may hesitate to be open about their religio-spiritual identity:

An interesting thing happened recently when it comes to sexuality and religion. There is one particular staff member who fits the stereotypical mannerisms of being homosexual. And, there are all kinds of rumors and that kind of thing. One day at a staff meeting, he said that being gay is wrong and that God will punish you for that. And, I was floored by that! Even if he’s not homosexual, I’m sure that he’s been accused at some point in his life. I had made my own assumptions that he was [homosexual]. It just blew my mind to hear that. And, I wasn’t the only one who was floored by that, either (laughing). There was quite a buzz after that meeting (laughing). (Jack, director of minority student affairs)

**Thwarted Attempts**

Many student affairs administrators shared stories of their attempts to overtly express their religio-spirituality in their workplace. These occurrences, however, are instances in which these attempts have been thwarted. Mark, the associate vice-president of student development at a private institution, shared the following experience as an example of a thwarted attempt:

There were a number of announcements that were made at Northern University [pseudonym for a public, research I institution at which he used to work] of general interest to the campus community that went out over the faculty and staff listserv. And, there were several of us who had gotten together to form a . . . to pray together for Northern University once a month. So, we wanted to let folks know about this. And, we were told that we were not allowed to broadcast that over the email system, because that would make people feel uncomfortable.

A few professionals stated that issues of religio-spirituality are “personal” and “private” and that their uncertainty about their own beliefs prevents them from openly expressing their opinions. For the most part, however, fear, the desire to avoid controversy, and having previ-
ously been thwarted in their attempts to express their own religio-spirituality were the reasons given by some for being “terrified to talk” about spirituality with their student affairs colleagues at work.

**Discussion and Implications**

As a whole, the student affairs administrators in this study recognized the desire of many of their colleagues to bring religio-spirituality, regardless of how this was conceptualized, into the workplace. Stories shared by the respondents relay the importance that many administrators attribute to working with religio-spiritual colleagues as well as to having discussions about religio-spiritual issues. Through their stories, the role of religio-spirituality in the work of these administrators was described as being quite salient. For many, religio-spirituality provides support and encouragement among their staff. Additionally, the leadership styles and strategies of many student affairs administrators are shaped by their own religio-spirituality. Unfortunately, in spite of all of this, many of the administrators in this study recognized that they as well as their colleagues are quite reluctant to openly express their religio-spirituality in the workplace. Many of them express fear about doing so. Some simply want to avoid controversy. And others are reluctant to openly express their religio-spirituality as a result of thwarted past attempts.

In this study, respondents were given the opportunity to conceptualize religio-spirituality themselves. It became clear through the interviews that most of the administrators in this study viewed it in a similar way as Nash (2001); their stories spoke of religion and spirituality as being somewhat distinct, yet overlapping. Most made little to no effort to distinguish one from the other while discussing the basic phenomenon under investigation. Future research is needed to continue clarifying the meaning of religio-spirituality and the impact of religio-spirituality upon the work of student affairs administrators. In particular, does free expression of religio-spiritual identity lead to increased job satisfaction among student affairs administrators? How is motivation on the job impacted by the freedom to express one's religio-spirituality? How does religio-spiritual expression differ in different parts of the nation and/or on different types of campuses?
“Blending two worlds” is the metaphor used by one student affairs administrator in this study to describe the challenge of openly expressing religio-spirituality in the workplace. Rogers and Dantley (2001) aptly state that faculty and staff in colleges and universities tend to demarcate their public and private lives. They state that for many professionals in higher education, the academy is the arena of the intellect, and emotion and spirit are suspect. Therefore, many higher education professionals do not speak of their inner lives in their university work. In spite of the challenges of blending their public and private lives, the administrators in this study provided suggestions for doing so. Educators in all types of educational institutions can benefit from these suggestions.

First of all, educators are encouraged to do their own “soul-searching” and “soul work.” Paula, a vice-chancellor of student affairs, stated that “we don’t spend enough time listening to that inner voice and inner soul. You can’t be a good leader and make good decisions unless you do some soul-searching.” Rogers and Dantley (2001) suggest that student affairs administrators need to be “soul leaders” who commit themselves to the inward journey and who recognize that the path to wholeness is a process of continuous personal change and ongoing reflection. Others (e.g., Allen & Kellom, 2001; Chavez, 2001; Love, 2001) have also made similar suggestions to student affairs administrators. One administrator in this study suggested that every three months, student affairs staff should take at least a day and a half by themselves—to journal, meditate, and read. Additionally, another respondent stated that it is important to be strengthened in your own faith community once you have identified a community that best fits with your religio-spiritual beliefs and values.

A second suggestion that the administrators in this study provided is to be open and authentic about their religio-spirituality. One administrator stated that many staff feel “incongruent” if they try to hide their religio-spirituality. Penny, the director of campus life at a Baptist-affiliated college, stated that “you can’t separate self and values from what you do.” Others stated that “you need to stay true to who you are” because “it sets an example for students.” For this to happen, however, administrators need to feel safe at work. Allen and Kellom (2001) state that if people do not feel safe at work, they do not reveal themselves and that, over time, this diminishes their religio-spiritual devel-
opment, authenticity, and integrity. Unfortunately, the academy offers few safe and supportive environments where professionals can share and explore the deeper meanings of their lives with each other (Astin et al., 2002).

A final suggestion, then, is to actively create safe environments for dialogue. Instead of being fearful or attempting to avoid controversy, educators are admonished to be proactive about learning about the religio-spiritual beliefs and values of their colleagues. Rogers and Dantley (2001) believe that “soul leaders” actively seek to understand the religio-spiritual dimension of others. Furthermore, they suggest that soul leaders in student affairs develop open spaces where democratic, caring communities can be cocreated with others and create “holding environments” that prompt the inward journey. Similarly, Nash (2001) proposes the occurrence of “moral conversations” through which “unbounded dialogue” can occur (p. 14). These conversations are marked by an understanding that “the best way to get a person to talk is to treat that person with the utmost respect” and to realize that each person “lays claim to some share of truth” (p. 174). As student affairs administrators become more comfortable with this type of dialogue, there will most likely be an increased freedom of religio-spiritual expression. Hopefully, then, they will be able to successfully blend their public and private lives while at work.

References


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