This chapter discusses ways student affairs professionals can use the privileged identity exploration model to facilitate difficult discussions at the intersections of religious privilege. Examples are given and practical suggestions offered on ways to create conditions for productive dialogue.

Facilitating Difficult Dialogues at the Intersections of Religious Privilege

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A core definition of a difficult dialogue is a verbal or written exchange of ideas or opinions among citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views about beliefs and values (Watt, 2007). As informed by Fried’s definition of religious privilege (2007), difficult dialogue at the intersections of religious privilege happens in situations where dominant worldviews (nonsecular values, beliefs, and practices) are unconsciously accepted as the norm and where any secular or nondominant belief systems (Islam, Judaism, atheism) are marginalized. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the conditions that make dialogue surrounding religious privilege difficult and to share examples of practical ways conversation can be made more productive around these issues.

Elements of Difficult Dialogues

Difficult dialogues at the intersections of religious privilege have at least three elements that create a perfect storm: the juxtaposition of dominant and marginalized groups, the complexity of paradox and polarities, and the affiliation with personal and social identity.

**Dominant and Marginalized Paradigm.** A contributing factor to difficult dialogues regarding religion is the tension between dominant and marginalized worldview (Goodman, 2001). This paradigm is born out of a complex history where certain groups have been dominant (whites and
Christians) over others (people of color and Jews). Paulo Freire (1970) first referred to the concept *critical consciousness*. It can be described as the ability to evaluate and take action against the oppressive social, political, and economic elements in a society. Examining religious privilege and the assumptions behind it helps to illuminate the dominant and marginalized social structure that creates oppressive conditions for those who are practicing nonsecular or nondominant belief systems (Seifert, 2007). Encouraging students to discuss the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression can be extremely challenging for them both emotionally and intellectually. Ultimately, though, this type of challenge will inspire students to take action to change societal injustice.

**Paradox and Polarities.** Johnson (1996) proposes viewing issues we face as polarities to manage rather than problems to solve. He distinguishes the difference between paradox/polarities and problems in two ways. First, the difficulty associated with the issue is ongoing. Problems have solutions and an end point in the process. Paradoxes are continually in process of solving, and there is no clear end point. Second, within the issue there are two poles that are interdependent. Paradoxes cannot stand alone and depend on the balancing of both ends. In other words, “both one pole and its apparent opposite depend on each other” (p. 82). For instance, discussing atheism presents a paradox or polarity. In a society dominated by theistic belief systems, considering what it means to hold simultaneously the ideals of the dominant Christian belief system in America and at the same time associating that atheists can have morals and be ethical without worshiping a god is quite a paradox. According to Johnson’s definition, this dilemma is not a problem because it is not transient. It is a classic issue that entangles the American value of freedom of religion and respect for independence with the predominant charge in being a Christian that says to bring all souls to Christ. Having students grapple with these ideals can spawn personal and social exploration about values, religious practices, and American society that are many-sided. These types of many-sided discussions are common when discussing religious privileges.

**Personal and Social Identity.** Historically, religion has been a central socializing factor for young children in the United States (Reason and Davis, 2005). Our academic and social calendars have long been designed in such ways that afford time to spend with family during Christian religious holidays (Seifert, 2007). Therefore, our personal and social identities are developed based on expectations that are influenced in this society by religion, most often Christianity. Connections to religion go beyond rituals and doctrine and into the culture of communities and families. Exploring religious privilege often leads to deeply emotional discussions as students consider what it means to leave the security of their socialization that is insulated and reinforced by a regular routine of holiday and family time.
The Privileged Identity Exploration Model: Potential Responses for Facilitators

The three elements of dominant/marginalized paradigm, paradox/polarities, and personal/social identity create the perfect storm for dialogue fraught with opportunities for students to present defenses to protect their personal and social identities. The privileged identity exploration (PIE) model identifies eight defenses that students often display when exploring their social or political position in society (Watt, 2007). This section suggests ways student affairs professionals can respond when students are displaying certain defenses in dialogues surrounded by religious privilege and practical suggestions on what practitioners can do to create conditions for productive dialogue.

Using the Privileged Identity Exploration Model: Potential Responses for Facilitators

The Watt (2007) privileged identity exploration (PIE) model sets out eight defensive behaviors students might display when engaging in difficult dialogue. The eight defense modes are categorized by behaviors one exhibits when recognizing, contemplating, or addressing a privileged identity (see Figure 8.1). Recognizing Privilege Identity describes reactions when students initially are presented with anxiety-provoking stimuli surrounding a privileged identity such as their religion. Reactions are denial, deflection, or rationalization. Contemplating Privileged Identity explains individuals’ reactions when they are beginning to think more carefully about provoking ideas about a social justice issue, including religion in society, and they may display intellectualization, principium, or false envy defenses. Addressing Privileged Identity portrays behaviors of individuals who are attending to their dissonant feelings about social injustice related to this new awareness, and are involved in some action to resolve the issue. Reactions may be displayed in the defenses of benevolence or minimization.

There are six assumptions underlying the model, two of them particularly relevant to discussions regarding religious privilege: “(1) Engaging in difficult dialogue is a necessary part of unlearning social oppression and (2) Defense modes are normal human reactions to the uncertainty that one feels when exploring their privileged identities in more depth” (Watt, 2007, p. 119). The model assumes that dialogue that creates feelings of discomfort is a normal and necessary part of gaining critical consciousness.

The next sections present brief descriptions of the three defenses (principium, false envy, and benevolence) that are most likely to appear during discussions surrounding religious privilege. Examples are given of potential responses that facilitators can use to avoid allowing the defensive behavior to derail the discussion and instead focus so that individuals can move toward greater critical consciousness. These examples are not intended to be a recipe...
Figure 8.1. The Privileged Identity Exploration Model

Dissonance Provoking Stimuli

New Awareness About Self or Other  →  Social Justice Action Based on New Awareness

Denial
Rationalization
Intellectualization
False Envy
Benevolence
Deflection
Principium
Minimization
Fear
Entitlement
for cross-cultural interactions, but simply suggestions that are meant to be expanded on and personalized to the style of the facilitator.

**Principium Potential Responses.** A principium response is a defensive reaction driven by a personal or political belief. For example, a student might respond:

I feel badly for my friend who is a lesbian and the hatred directed toward her. I think that homosexuals have every right that heterosexuals have to love and to be loved in return. However, I feel that God did not intend for men and men or women and women to be together. I believe that marriage is a sacrament intended to unite man and woman through God. I do not think that it is ignorant or intolerant, just what I believe. I do not accept that part of her.

As a facilitator, you want to avoid having the conversation shut down by the trump card of religious beliefs that prevents exploring this issue in any depth. In general, consider how you can give and take in the conversation. For instance, you may need to acknowledge the paradox in the social and political climate that brands this student intolerant in a society where religious freedom is a foundational value, but also have this student sit with the discomfort she is feeling in the moment. You can do this by focusing the conversation on feelings rather than thoughts, values, or beliefs. Explore the feelings of being upset and disheartened. Focus on what it means to experience injustice on a personal and political level. You may want to have her examine the hurt that exists in her friendship and point out comparative types of pain inherent in other social injustices done in this society. You may want to point out injustices that she can relate to that might help her examine her feelings outside this principle. Another option for facilitators might be to ask a what-if question, which attempts to hold in place the arguments about homosexuality and encourage the student to explore in more depth the complexities of the issues facing sexual minorities. For example, you can ask the student: “What if the belief that homosexuality is wrong were set aside as not a right-or-wrong issue for a moment? How then would you view rights and privileges for same-sex marriage?” Exploring this question and subsequent others might lead the student toward raising her critical consciousness by exploring Christian privilege and how the social and political structure in this society supports homoprejudice (Logan, 1996).

**False Envy Potential Responses.** A false envy defense is signified by a display of affection for a person or a feature of a person in an effort to deny the complexity of the social and political context. In a discussion examining issues related to Muslims and race, a student displaying a false envy defense might say:

I do not know many Muslim women. I have noticed that some wear the hijab, and some do not. I expect to see Middle Eastern women wearing it, but not African American Muslims. It makes me uncomfortable for the African

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American woman because I think she might be associated with the Nation of Islam and that radical thinking. I associate Middle Eastern women wearing hijabs with being married to a man who oppresses her. What I really like is the beautiful variations of color and the variety in the headdresses and how it matches their clothes. I think it is so exotic. I think they are so disciplined.

If this statement were made during a group discussion with students, you would want to avoid having the conversation shift toward simple sharing of various admirations. Again, focus on the feelings provoking the statement from the student. You might want to acknowledge the strength it took for the student to own and say out loud to the group that she did not know about the history and meaning behind wearing a hijab. You may want to reassure the group that it is normal to feel anxious about the unknown. As the facilitator, you may want to introduce resources to the group that would help them learn more about Muslims of various races. Focus on exploring the complexities of racism and religious privilege that are underlying her statement. You might ask the students to explore in depth what she means by disciplined, and contrast that with her assumptions about Christian religions. You may want to explore the many messages sent about skin color and appearance in this society. And ask the group to explore the expectations of what is normal and beautiful. As a facilitator, your goal would be to have the participants explore feelings about the complexity of the issue related to religion and race and shift the focus away from surface-level observations.

**Benevolence Potential Responses.** A benevolence defensive response is based on displaying an overly sensitive attitude toward a social and political issue based on an attitude of charity. The millennial generation of college students is said to be demographically the most diverse group of college students (Broido, 2004). In addition, many have studied abroad or participated in service-learning projects that have boosted their feelings of confidence about their ability to face diversity issues. And yet while millennial students attending college today may have been exposed to more diversity, they likely have not thoroughly explored issues related to power, privilege, and oppression in depth or “what it means to function honorably in a multicultural community” (Watt, 2007, p. 114). When challenged to explore in more depth the role of religion, privilege, and service in one’s life, a student may respond:

I have participated in service-learning trips over spring break to help members of communities who are ill, disabled, or have suffered some type of devastation. Last year, I did missionary work in war-torn countries where I brought the message of democracy. Each time I have felt overwhelmed by the feelings of support and gratitude expressed by those receiving the help. I know that injustice exists, but I feel that if I keep helping those who are less fortunate than I, then I am making a difference.
In general, focus on the assets the students bring and compliment them on their commitment to service. As a facilitator, you would have to encourage the students to explore the dynamics of power and privilege that are in acts of charity. You could do this by asking them to consider how acts of charity are centered on both the power of the giver and the powerlessness of the target population. You might ask the group to consider how reaching down to help those less fortunate than yourself can contribute to maintaining the current dominant society structure. Ask the student to grapple with the question: “What am I getting from this interaction?” Your goal as a facilitator is to guide participants to explore their emotionally intense feelings about the intersections of religious privilege along with ableism or classism and not allow them to avoid the discomfort by focusing on their goodwill.

**Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model: Relevant Applications of Foundational Principles.** In sum, the foundation of the PIE model suggests that responses such as the ones exemplified above are primal responses born out of feelings of fear or entitlement, or both. The fear in the case of religious privilege might be based in the threat the questioning of shared values and beliefs brings to social relationships, especially familial. The need to respond defensively could also be rooted in an entitled attitude reinforced by the societal insulation of Christian or religious privilege that exists in American culture. As a facilitator, it is useful to understand the source of these defenses because it will help you to empathize with students and yet keep focused on the goal of raising their critical consciousness.

**Suggestions for Creating Conditions for Productive Difficult Dialogues**

Why is it important to encourage dialogue about the intersections of religious privilege? It is important for student affairs practitioners to find ways to effectively manage dialogues at the intersections of religious privilege on college campuses in America. Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (2008) point out three concerns of sixteen college presidents: (1) an increase in a polarizing tone in academic debate that silences controversial views, (2) a proliferation of threats toward academic freedom and a rise in anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab incidents, and (3) a lack of responsibility for constructive dialogue that is carried by all higher education administrators rather than just student affairs professionals. A call is out to institutions of higher education to find more ways to have constructive difficult dialogue facilitated by faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals on campus (Nash, Bradley, and Chickering, 2008). Here are three conditions to help create the emotional and intellectual space for difficult dialogues:

- **Acknowledge the dominant and marginalized paradigm.** Realize that the concerns of many individuals from marginalized groups are at least in part related to systemic and external forces rather than internal psychological
problems or deficiencies. There are subtle ways that the dominant system is upheld and reinforced in dialogue. By simply not intentionally acknowledging the dominant and marginalized paradigm, a facilitator can reinforce the dominant societal structure. Therefore, as a facilitator, you have to overtly and in conscious ways acknowledge dominance in language and practices. For example, be conscious of the use of pronouns, such as referring to the dominant group (Christians) as “us” and mainstream and the marginalized group (atheists) as “them” or not mainstream. Find ways to equalize the view of the dominant and marginalized groups in the dialogue by referring to both groups objectively as belief systems, thereby taking away the feeling of ownership and the power inherent in the silent assumptions that one group holds the prevailing interest of society.

- **Understand the personal and social investment.** Recognize that discussions about religious privilege are central to identity (Jones and McEwen, 2000). Avoid approaching dialogue in ways that are punitive; instead, communicate an understanding that these issues are deeply connected to family and traditions that comprise our personal and social identities. Affirm their emotion. Acknowledge that it is difficult to engage in discussions about religion, and yet reinforce that college is a place for facing challenging questions, exploring ideas, and developing identity.

- **Tap the potential power in paradox.** View paradox and polarities as opportunities for dialogue and deeper reflection rather than problems to solve (Johnson, 1996). As a facilitator, treat the tension around disagreement and the resulting uncomfortable feelings as normal and appropriate. Allow students the space to examine their beliefs and contradicting ideas. Focus on the process and the new awareness that comes forth when exploring the interdependent nature of paradoxes rather than on an end point of solving the problem. This can create an atmosphere that invites students to have the courage to boldly face ideals that challenge their belief system.

Using these three conditions will help to create environments where students feel freer to examine contradictory belief systems and develop their identity. More important, students who have been traditionally marginalized (Jews, Muslims, and atheists) on campuses and excluded because of the dominant social structure associated with religious privilege will be included by allowing a more complex conversation about beliefs that goes beyond discussions of good and bad or right or wrong and more directly address the multifaceted advantages within the social system.

**Conclusion**

It is important for student affairs professionals to create opportunities for students to engage in difficult dialogues about religious privilege. Develop-
ing the skills and experience to facilitate these dialogues is equally important. Using frameworks such as the PIE model can help student affairs professionals who are facilitating these difficult dialogues by identifying behaviors that often derail productive conversation and employing strategies to help focus the discussions on issues that will help to increase students’ critical consciousness. As a wise colleague said to me, “It is the paradox that brings the leader forth” (F. O. Matthews, personal communication, April 18, 2008). Paradox is inherent in discussions about religious privilege, and teaching students skills to grapple with polarities by simultaneously holding the tension of opposites will ultimately make them better leaders in our society.

References

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