

Full Length Research Paper

Effects of interfaith dialog activities: The role of a Turkish Student Association at an East Coast U.S. University

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The purpose of this case study is to analyze a Turkish Student Association's (TSA) extracurricular activities involving interfaith dialog with respect to their contributions to students' academic and social development in a predominantly white, Catholic, liberal arts college located in the Northeastern United States. The study aims to explain how such activities are important for students' academic and social development as well as the development of their perception of interfaith dialog. The study focuses on four major interfaith dialog activities organized by TSA: (1) lecture, (2) exhibition, (3) interfaith dialogue dinner and (4) educational local trip.

Key words: Interfaith dialog, students' organizations, extracurricular activities.

INTRODUCTION

This Turkish Student Association (TSA) was established in 2008 by the Turkish graduate students in a Catholic liberal arts college located in the Northeastern United States. Like all other student associations in the school, the TSA prepared a constitution indicating the purpose of the association, membership procedures, officers' titles and responsibilities (that is, president, treasury, and secretary), rules of order, and voting and election procedures. With respect to its cultural emphasis, TSA naturally stated the first purpose of its existence as: "[to bring] people with interest in Turkish culture together". Accordingly, all activities, at some level, included motifs from Turkish culture. Some activities, however, were directly related to the Turkish culture (e.g., trips to Turkey, exhibitions and lectures about Turkish culture, etc.). Given that the TSA's officers and members might have more experience with transitions to new educational environments and cultures, TSA stated the second

purpose of its existence as: "to support its members to overcome the difficulties that they face during their transition to a new educational environment and culture". Indeed newcomers, especially international students, may face culture shock, which can have dramatic social and academic consequences. The third purpose of the TSA is stated as: "to contribute efforts on inter-cultural, inter-faith understanding and diversity initiative". This last purpose of TSA became the core aim and outcome when designing and organizing their activities, both alone and in cooperation with other students' associations or community partners. Several activities that are organized by TSA, such as lectures, exhibitions, trips, dinners, luncheons, and concerts, included themes and motifs involving interfaith and intercultural understanding and development. For instance, it organized an interfaith dialog lecture series. Lecture titles included "Jesus in Islam", "Immaculate Mary in the Bible and in the Quran",

"The Necessity of Interfaith Dialog: A Muslim Perspective", and "Dialog of Civilizations". TSA quickly became one of the most active student organizations in the university, having organized more than 35 activities in the first few years of its existence.

To reveal how TSA's extracurricular activities involving interfaith dialog contribute to students' academic and social development as well as the development of their perception of interfaith dialog, specific research questions are:

1. How did students perceive this specific club's interfaith dialog activities?
2. What did students report about gaining interfaith dialog knowledge and experience during the activities that they did not report gaining from classroom experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies show that involvement in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom positively affects students' academic and social development (Astin, 1993; Endo and Harpel, 1982; Foubert and Grainger, 2006; Huang and Chang, 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Kuh (1995) states that different out-of-class experiences have the potential to contribute to students' intellectual, social, and emotional development. According to Kuh (1995), out-of-class activities create personal and social challenges for students and this, in turn, encourages students to develop more complicated views with respect to both personal and social matters. Further, out-of-class activities provide opportunities for synthesizing and integrating in-class experiences into real-life circumstances. Inman and Pascarella (1998) add that college students' involvement in out-of-class activities contributes significantly to increases in end-of-year critical thinking skills, especially during freshmen year. Accordingly, Inman and Pascarella (1998) state that students' involvement in extracurricular activities is a key element in the process of students' social and academic development. McCluskey-Titus et al. (2002) emphasize a positive relationship between intellectual development and both social activities and sense of belonging. Conversely, Tinto (1987) focuses on the network development of students that is gained through out-of-class activities. According to Tinto, extracurricular activities help students to join broader college communities in addition to helping their academic development. Holzweiss et al. (2008) state that, regard-less of students' organization type (that is, academic or non-academic), extracurricular activity experiences result in personal benefits for the students. They say students' personal benefits included career development, improved interpersonal relations, and the development of job-specific skills, interpersonal communication skills, leadership skills, and general business

skills, as well as learning more about service to others. The literature is clear that students' involvement in extracurricular activities outside their classes positively impacts their academic and social development. However, what we do not know is what and how specific activities affect students' academic and social development. Further, it must be emphasized that the lack of literature about the contributions of interfaith dialog activities to students' academic and social development and to the development of their perception of interfaith dialog suggests that research on this specific topic is essential.

Importance and benefits of interfaith dialog

According to Shafiq and Nimer (2007), "interfaith dialog means to hold on to one's faith while simultaneously trying to understand another person's faith", and in such a dialog honesty and respect are the key values. Further, the goal of such a dialog is not to reach a consensus. Rather, the purpose of the interfaith dialog is to collaborate and combine the strengths of different religions for the welfare of humanity. Garfinkel and Zymelman (2004) of The United States Institute of Peace explain interfaith dialog simply as a "conversation" among people of different religions and faiths. In this notion, however, "conversation" has an expansive definition and is not limited to verbal exchange. Nor can this conversation be limited to faith perspectives; instead, it must also include everyday conversations among people to build up mutual understanding, respect and reciprocity. Further, interfaith dialog may take place during any substantial activities in which people become engaged, such as service activities that allow people of diverse faiths to socialize while working together towards the same purpose. By having these conversations and activities, interfaith dialog creates a peaceful atmosphere for coexistence. Interfaith dialog can also occur at both the individual and the organizational level. Such organizations may include churches, mosques, temples, and higher education institutions. It must be emphasized, however, that interfaith dialog does not seek to create a new religion through the combination of existing religions.

According to Gülen (2000), interfaith dialog is essential to the salvation of modern man from the prevailing materialistic worldview, which disturbs the balance between humanity and nature as well as the balance within the individual. According to Gülen, this balance and its ensuing peace only happen when the material and spiritual realms are reconciled, and interfaith dialog promotes this reconciliation. Gülen also states that interfaith dialog seeks to realize the oneness and unity of religions and that, given the universality of belief, this goal might help solve modern human's problems. The second reason for interfaith dialog comes from the nature

of religions. Gülen stresses that religions accept the same source for themselves, and that all religions pursue the same goal. Indeed, he asserts that “religion embraces all beliefs and races in brotherhood, and exalts love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood and freedom via its prophets” (Gülen, 2000).

In the Berlin Declaration of Interreligious Dialogue (2008), the European Council of Religious Leaders emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue in traversing the dividing lines of culture and language in Europe. Further, the council noted that religion is seen as an obstacle to peaceful coexistence of societies, alongside other challenges of our time such as climate change, poverty, migration, the marginalization of women, discrimination and terrorism. The declaration proposed that people could overcome any religious challenges that might be caused by division through united resources, and presented a road map that includes standards, rules, and guidelines that might be used for all interfaith activities. The purpose of the declaration is stated as “to promote bold, responsible and well-informed inter-religious dialogue on all levels of European society”. The demographic landscape of the United States, meanwhile, has changed dramatically and will continue to do so. Heckman and Neiss (2010) indicate that growing religious diversity is one of the current realities of the United States. Immigration is one of the causes for this growth. The United States Census Bureau (2012) indicates that nearly 9,000,000 new immigrants settled in the country from 2000 to 2009. Naturally, newcomers bring their own culture and religions with them. “Neighborhoods and communities that were once predominantly composed of one ethnic group, social class, family structure, or religious affiliation are quickly changing” (Allison and Hibbler, 2004). Accordingly, interfaith dialog is becoming a must; as Professor of Ecumenical Theology and President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic, Küng (1991) suggests in his famous quotation about interfaith dialog, “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions”.

According to Camilleri (2004), the first benefit of interfaith dialog is the shattering of the psychological walls and fears about others. People of diverse beliefs set aside imposed ideas and opinions from outside sources, and learn through direct interaction the certainties about each other. The second benefit, Camilleri asserts, is that interfaith dialog makes people aware of “the collective heritage of humankind”. Further, excluding or ignoring any major religious tradition not only diminishes the collective heritage of humankind but also diminishes each of its heirs. Camilleri indicates that the third benefit of interfaith dialog is its emphasis on the importance of citizens’ understanding of the value of both

commonality and difference in order to co-exist and to illuminate and reinforce each other. In short, the benefits of interfaith dialog include promotion of respect and diversity, development of a more cohesive community, restoration of trust, and reduction of the feeling of threat.

In the summer of 2011, The White House invited higher education institutions in the United States to make interfaith dialog a priority theme during their 2011-2012 academic years in order to highlight its importance. Numerous colleges and universities accepted this invitation and prioritized interfaith dialog in their curricula and in extracurricular activities. The White House also provided guidance for those institutions. Model interfaith dialog programs have been prepared and feedback from the institutions has been requested. Specifically, the White House brought an Interfaith Leadership Institute to Georgetown University in Washington, DC. The institute’s leadership training equipped about 200 student leaders and 100 campus staff from across the country with the vision, knowledge, and skills necessary to improve interfaith cooperation on campuses. With over 250 institutions participating, the success of the President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge encouraged the White House to continue the program for the 2012-2013 academic year.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate students’ academic and social development as well as the development of their perceptions of interfaith dialog as promoted by the TSA, four major events were considered from among the most common extracurricular activities offered by universities (that is luncheons, lectures, conferences, exhibitions, trips, service activities, etc). Although the research methodology of this study is based on both interviews and observations, the researcher included a lecture, an exhibition, an educational trip, and a dinner event for his study since it is assumed that different types of activities result in diverse benefits and reflections. The first major activity was a lecture titled “Immaculate Mary, the Blessed, in the Bible and in the Quran.” As evidenced by its title, this lecture focused on Mary, who is a holy figure in both Christianity and Islam. Two professors gave their lectures in a one-hour schedule that was followed by questions from the audience. The lectures focused on the similarities and differences between the two religions’ perspectives on Mary. The second major activity was a photography exhibition titled “Marvelous Collection of Sacred Trusts”. This exhibition included images of the belongings of important people in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (the originals of these trusts are exhibited in Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Turkey). Photographs included the cooking vessel of Abraham, the sword of David, the turban of Joseph, and a letter of Muhammad. During the exhibition, which was held for three days in one of the main halls on the university’s campus and attracted approximately 350 visitors, an expert answered visitors’ questions about the photographs and their subject matter. The third activity was a Ramadan Iftar Dinner, which followed by a lecture series given by four religious representatives including a Buddhist, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim. The theme of these lectures was each religion’s perception of interfaith dialog. The total number of student participants at this dinner event was approximately 120. The fourth event was an educational and

cultural day trip that included visits to Turkish cultural centers in New Jersey and in New York City. This trip also included a lecture titled "Human Rights in Islam", which was given at the Turkish Cultural Center, New York, by a college professor. Twenty-two students participated in this trip. These four extracurricular activities were designed to (1) promote interactions among participants and especially among students, and (2) advance academic knowledge that students might not otherwise receive during regular class attendance.

To investigate students' academic and social development as well as the development of their perception of interfaith dialog, twelve students who participated in the above-mentioned activities were asked four open-ended interview questions. The students were selected randomly regardless of their major or year of study at the university. The interviews were conducted after the events and outside of campus. Each interview was completed in a single 45-min session. The interview questions asked to all interviewees were (1) what have you learned with respect to interfaith dialog during this activity? (2) why was the specific activity important for you? (3) what are the advantages of this activity regarding interfaith dialog for a diverse community? and (4) what is your perception about the activities in terms of students' social and academic development?

FINDINGS

All participants indicated that they felt such events were beneficial because the activities helped their educational and social development. Regardless of the type of event, all responses were positive and all activities were found to be important as a part of extracurricular activities. The findings revealed three themes identified by the participants. The first theme was the educational knowledge of religious similarities and common history. Students reported opportunities for sharing cultural richness and for growing from learned knowledge about the cultures of other students. Ten interviewed students indicated that they were not aware of the common roots of religions, such as the commonalities between the role of Mary in the Quran and her role in the Bible. Students indicated that through this understanding they developed tolerance and friendships with people of religions different from themselves. For example, one interviewed freshman student said:

I have realized that we have a lot of common roots. Although our understanding of religion is different in many ways there are a lot of similarities, there is a lot of communality and common history. We get to know people one on one. And that is so much better and the friendship is formed.

An interviewed senior student said:

This exhibition was an opportunity to share the cultural richness that we have. When we see those [sacred] trusts we hold in common, we see that it is not about division; it is about unity. This gives a strong perspective about the necessity of organizing such events especially

for the college students.

Students also emphasized the academic benefits that they gained from the type of interfaith dialog activities organized by the TSA. An interviewed freshman said:

I have heard the term of Abrahamic religions for the first time. This is very interesting and there is evidence that supports the notion that religions have [the] same sources. Abraham is just an example. The names and important figures in...Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the same, like Jesus, Moses, Abraham, Jacob... I can also say that some people even do not know that Muslims believe another god or a form of god. This is not true.

Another interviewed freshman said:

I am sustained by the emphasis on Mary in Quran. It was stunning to learn that Mary has such a high role there. That is highly effective in helping to understand Muslims. I did not know that we were that close. I can also say that this lecture tells me that I need to learn more about Judaism and Islam and the shared heritage.

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was the events' contributions to students' own decision-making about religious issues. Several students found that these activities were critically important, since having access to the facts on their college campus helped them to make their own judgments about current religious issues. Students reported that the events provided by the TSA gave them information that helped them understand religious conflict that they knew little about from mass media and the internet, and that the events provided a venue to ask questions and make personal decisions. For example, an interviewed senior student said:

Especially in a college campus, I think it is so important to bring awareness and education so that students make their own decision, their own judgment. But having the facts to make this judgment is so important.

When asked what the advantages of the TSA's specific interfaith dialog activities were for a diverse community, an interviewed senior student said:

I think we have a lot of polarization on the world stage. A lot of people unwilling to talk to each other and the real solution for this polarization is to make people talk to each other at the individual level. Accordingly they can make their own decision and judgment. I think this is the best way to do a fair decision. Those interfaith activities encourage students to talk more about what they believe and understand about others' faith. And talking, I mean sharing the ideas among the people help them to do

healthier judgment. Moreover, I personally believe that such decisions are mostly positive since most students know little about the faiths.

When asked why was the specific activity important for you, an interviewed sophomore student said:

We hear...tons of things about the religious conflicts from TV and from internet. I found a chance to ask questions about those conflicts directly to the speaker during the reception... The lecture was very enlightening and educationally helpful. I believe we need more activities like this one.

Another interviewed junior student said:

I believe that though the events take around one or two hours (lectures, dinners) they simply lead students to think after those hours. They give clues, create question marks in students' minds and I assume that students continue searching about specific religions, beliefs, thinkers, etc. I also believe that students are more confident to make their own decisions after those events.

The third and final theme that emerged from the interviews was the expanded socialization of students. In other words, students emphasized that such activities helped them to meet and socialize with people of diverse backgrounds. Most of the students expressed that they had met with a Jewish or Muslim person for the first time during these activities and thus had made friends through the revealing commonalities between religions. When asked why the specific activity was important for you, a junior student said:

I have met a Muslim student today. We talked and I can say that we are friends now. We talked about our common roots. We talked not only about the religion but also about the history that we shared. You know that there are mutual biases that we have about the others. To be freed from such biases I think it is good to know others in person. I believe we will continue our talks.

Another junior student answered the question thusly:

I think we create our own polarization and separation. I have friends and when I look [at] them I can see that they are very similar to each other. They are my friends but there is not much difference about their backgrounds. But this activity provides opportunity to make friends with diverse backgrounds. In other words, we become more socialized and I believe that meeting with people with diverse backgrounds is the real socialization.

An interviewed sophomore student added:

Meeting with real people with different backgrounds at the individual level is critically important... We are all

human beings and it is not difficult to be friends with them. They listen to music, watch football or basketball, and we learn these things when we talk to them and such activities create best opportunities to meet with them. This way we learn...mutual respect. We also socialize.

Another interviewed senior said:

Individuals have their own lives with a limited number of people and limited diversity. I mean ask a student...how many friends he has with different religious or ethnic backgrounds. We have barriers that do not allow us to reach others, learn about their cultures, religions. We do not know others well.

Another interviewed senior student said:

I would like to say that the trip organizations are unique since people act as they are while traveling. I mean that students become more open and closer to each other. I believe that the conversations among them are becoming more straightforward. I think the travelling time that is naturally more than a lecture and a dinner builds closer relationships among the students. People know each other better when they travel together.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATION

Students participating in religious studies might have more exposure to the concept of commonalities of major religions, given that there are courses and special topics that deal specifically with religious dialog. However, most students pursuing other majors may remain unexposed to the interfaith dialog concept, since these religious studies courses might not be required or relevant. This study indicates that students perceive the TSA's activities as beneficial to the promotion of interfaith dialog at the college level. These perceptions are consistent among students, regardless of major or year of study. Throughout the interfaith dialog activities, students find the chance to meet people from other faiths and religions, and students report that this positively affected their social development. Several students indicated that socialization is one of the most important benefits of these activities. Further, such socialization included people from religiously and ethnically diverse backgrounds. They also report that they believe their interfaith friendships will continue in the future. Further, students report that lectures given during these activities helped their educational development and enlightened their perspectives and knowledge about other religions. Several students indicated that they learned a great amount of information about other religions that they had not learned in their coursework. None of the interviewed students stated that there was no beneficial gain from

those activities. All students reported that, at some level, they benefited from the specific activities investigated. The study also supported the benefits of interfaith activities mentioned in the literature. The study shows that students of diverse beliefs disregard imposed opinions from outside sources (e.g., mass media and internet) and interact directly to learn certainties about each other and each other's faiths. Further, the study confirms that interfaith dialog activities both on and off campus make people aware of "the collective heritage of humankind", as suggested by Camilleri (2004). Lastly, the study shows that such activities promote mutual respect and socialization among college students.

These findings lend support to the establishment of student clubs that promote interfaith dialog activities at college campuses. Students participating in these clubs express a tolerance for faiths different from their own, and thus student clubs such as this one could prove to enhance the educational experience with perspectives typically missed by students who are not pursuing religious studies academically. In a time when the lack of tolerance and understanding of other religions leads so often to strife and violence, clubs such as the TSA provide a way to increase tolerance.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and investigation of one club at one university. Future directions of research might include replications of this study at other universities with similar clubs to expand on this study; subsequent research should be conducted with larger sample sizes. Further, this study involved specific events with specific titles and formats. Future studies involving dissimilar extracurricular activities featuring the concept of interfaith dialog may yield different conclusions.

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