The Spirit of Community Engagement

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Abstract

Community engagement is more than merely counting instances of interaction with the community however that is defined. A fuller and more sustainable sense of community engagement rests on a recognition that spiritual values and dispositions form the basis of many people sense of belonging to a community and engaging it. Recognising the spiritual and transcendent dimension to community engagement is an important part of taking it seriously and this paper seeks to discuss this in reference to a critique of exclusive secular humanism, calculative rationality and the reduction of meaning that characterises current modern life. We find positive support for the importance of the spiritual dimension to community engagement in reference to both the policy positon of Universiti Sains Malaysia and current research in regards to staff values and spirituality. Ultimately the commitment to community engagement must be grounded in something more than mere utility or achieving some position against metric evaluations. This deeper grounding rests on taking seriously the spiritual dimension to this important topic.

Keywords: community engagement, spirituality, higher education, secularism, Universiti Sains Malaysia, commitment, instrumental rationality, calculative rationality, values

Introduction

The idea of community engagement for universities is not a new one and exists in some form or another in many university strategic plans, public pronouncements and the attendant academic literature (Onyx, 2008; Watson, 2007). Indeed the phrase is uttered so much that at times we can be forgiven for wondering if its very ubiquitousness in current discourse indicates a certain emptiness or at least vagueness in its meaning (Muller, 2009). Reflecting on why it is that we seek to engage the community and what values inform this desire entails thinking through what it is that grounds our commitments to community engagement. One way of understanding some deeper basis for our commitments to the community and to each other entails looking seriously and respecting the often deep faith based basis for our 'other-regarding' sensibility. This spiritual/transcendent basis for how we understand our mutual commitments and how we relate to each other in what Henry David Thoreau (Newman, 2005, p.1) called 'our common dwelling'

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may provide some insight into the deep grounding of community engagement in our higher educational institutions. This is especially so if the culture within which the debate about university community engagement occurs, then spiritual awareness and faith is practiced in the people's everyday lives.

In regards to universities, the issue of community engagement can best be thought through in regard to the history of the university and its beginnings in values and culture rooted in a spiritual sensibility, humanity and commitment to care (Haskins, 2004; Kovac & Coppola, 2000; Makdisi, 2003). The historical grounding of the university in principles that closely combined the search for knowledge and the ethical and faith dimension to human endeavour informed and structured the moral and social ecology of the societies and cultures that produced the first colleges, thus went on to form the basis of the universities we know today (Campbell, 2015; Makdisi, 1981). Indeed one of the important aspects of the whole notion of university community engagement is that universities themselves are communities where forms of moral commitment and broader social commitments are developed among both students and staff; and the values and norms developed within university communities are the foundation for the universities engagement with the broader social world of which it is a part (Campbell, 2013a, 2013b; Furman, 2002; J.Maurrasse, 2001; Jacob, Sutin, Weidman, & Yeager, 2015; Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001; Ledoux, Wilhite, & Silver, 2011; Longo, 2007; Salomone, 2000; Smiley, 1992). Perhaps a way of simplifying the above argument is to simply point out that the wider obligations that universities have to the broader community is grounded in the values norms and manners that characterize the way the social and moral ecology of the university itself functions as a mediating institution (Berger, 1976; Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Campbell, 2014).

In this paper we would like to look at how we think of community engagement as an idea and seek to open a discussion on understanding community engagement from the point of view of understanding universities as engaged with the cultivation and education of the spiritual dimension to human life (Henry & Beaty, 2007). Rene Guenon (Guenon, 1996, 2004) brought our attention to the diminution of the spiritual dimension in modern life and the development of trends within modernity which value that which can utilized, measured or sold. Guenon characterized modernity itself as being dominated by what he referred to as 'the reign of quantity' (Guenon, 2004). According to Guenon, meaning within modern societies becomes increasingly devoid of any deeper aspect and the spiritual dimension becomes increasingly absent in a world focused on 'use value' and calculation (Guenon, 2004). This modern dimension permeates and influences the policies and practices of universities that effectively function and need to seek legitimacy in a world where quantification and materialism reign seemingly supreme. The reduction of meaning to that which can be quantified and calculated has been amply described by among many others Max Weber (Weber, 1930) who theorized the spirit of rational calculation as the essence of how we value what we do in contemporary societies with its 'decline of all qualitative, social, and religious values' (Lowy & Sayre, 2001, p.35).

So the first thing for us to consider is how to avoid ending up in a situation where the success or failure of community engagement becomes measured and understood simply in reference to the accumulation of instances and the quantification of these instances into metrics. In other words given the criticism of modernity referred to above it is important that how we value community engagement is not similarly colonized by the discourse of quantification and calculation (Bewes, 2002; Jutten, 2011; Zerzan, 2002, p.53). Seeking to understand and open up our understanding of community engagement in reference to some deeper normative and transcendental dimension than what we can easily quantify may sound somewhat odd given the influence and salience of a secular and rational calculative imaginary for higher education (Arthur, 2005; W. Espeland & Sauder, 2009; W. N. Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Nonetheless the debate over the spiritual dimension to higher education is an important one and nowhere is it more important than in helping us to begin redefining the values, nature, aims and ultimate

reason for community engagement. Simply put: how many links, how many hits on the web site, how many meetings, how many this how many that, is not sufficient to justify or even understand the importance and significance of community engagement for universities.

Critics of the way in which higher educational institutions are increasingly pressured to value only those things that can be calculated and quantified surely point to a problem in how we frame understand and practice its meaning in our institutions of higher learning (Miller, 2005). Neo-liberal norms, isomorphic mimicry (Ashworth, Boyne, & Delbridge, 2009; Campbell, 2011b) and worship of measurement metrics is changing and distorting the nature and aims of higher education and crowding out considerations of community purpose and the common good (Campbell, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a). However, the problem with universities under rapture by neo-liberal faith is arguably further compounded by the fact that this reduction to quantification and calculation also colonizes space for community engagement which universities at the rhetorical level are increasingly pursuing. Heidegger (Heidegger, 1987, p.178) refers to current modernity as an 'age of consummate meaninglessness' and this meaninglessness is expressed in the reduction of meaning to number and quantification. Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder capture the way in which reduction to quantification in all the things universities do and are engaged in, can obscure what is being done as much as illuminate it. They write:

> *'Pressures for accountability, transparency, and productivity have increased dramatically in many institutional fields around the world. However, the transparency that quantification promises is only apparent. Numbers powerfully direct attention in ways that obscure as well as illuminate. The biases and assumptions embedded in measurement regimes are hard to disclose and we often take their authority at face value'* (W. Espeland & Sauder, 2009, p.21).

In other words the disquiet expressed in this paper rests not so much on the problem of the crowding out of community engagement in universities by the interests of neo-liberal competition, important as this is, but rather the colonization of all areas of work including community engagement by a calculative rationality which distorts and drains deeper value from even those practices. This erosion of value and colonization of practice by calculative reason curiously rests on the ethos and discourse of exclusivist secular humanism with its emphasis on what Marijan Sunjic refers to as a rationalist scientism which has increasingly lost its connection to a spiritual or transcendental perspective (Sunjic, 2007). It ought to be noted that scientism is not equivalent to science *per se* but rather is a kind of ideological 'ism' that crowds out and dismisses and seeks to eclipse ethics faith and other values that are not in keeping with its precepts (Hughes, 2012). Scientism and instrumental rationality ultimately do not provide a sure enough foundation to sustain the moral direction and grounding of a university nor an adequate basis for community engagement. Rather as Theodore M. Porter argues quantification and calculative rationality establishes a distance between researcher and participant, university and community. Reduction to number as a way of understanding community also objectifies community and alienate us from it (Porter, 1991, 1995a, 1995b, 2006).

Secular and Humanist Institutions

The secular nature of much higher educational discourse is closely related to the promise of humanism. Humanism underpins what we refer to as 'service learning' and university community engagement. This humanism is as Dan W. Butin points out based on the 'presumption' of 'tolerance' and mutuality and is often a 'taken-for-granted' aspect of the underlying ethos of university community engagement (Butin, 2010, p.56). It is worth noting the roots of our modern sense of humanism in the spiritual traditions, yet the way in which

humanism has come to be understood in the modern world seems to have entirely forgotten its roots (Makdisi, 1989, 1990). The same of course can also be said for the idea of a university in general. The core problem is that the philosophy of humanism which originally was rooted in a spiritual commitment to human betterment and engagement has become disconnected at least on the surface from a spiritual or transcendental world view and reduced to a means end view of humanity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Charles Taylor captures some of the characteristics of humanism and the effect it has had on our capacity to realise and delegitimize a deeper transcendental basis for our notions of flourishing and development of knowledge in the following:

> *'The development of modern freedom is then identified with the rise of an exclusive humanism—that is, one based exclusively on a notion of human flourishing, which recognizes no valid aim beyond this. The strong sense that continually arises that there is something more, that human life aims beyond itself, is stamped as an illusion and judged to be a dangerous illusion because the peaceful coexistence of people in freedom has already been identified as the fruit of waning transcendental visions'* (Taylor, 1999, p.19).

Human flourishing begs the question flourishing for what end? For what purpose? In regards to university community engagement we can also ask, to what end, for what purpose? Just itself? Community engagement if it is to avoid the charge that it is increasingly becoming surfeit of meaning needs to be interrogated with a view to establishing grounding the rationale for it in something deeper. Institutions which base themselves simply on the production of more knowledge *per se* and the connection to more things in and for themselves with no real basis in any value that lies outside either the thing or interaction itself run the risk of a collapse of moral purpose. Therein lies a critical problem for university community engagement: engagement for what? Why? To what end? Without some referent outside of our own subjective desires the answers to these questions become increasingly subjective and without grounding.

An Alternative: Universiti Sains Malaysia as Example

The way in which universities and their staff relate to the social world that surrounds them crucially defines and characterizes the nature of proper relationships with the surrounding community. The extent to which spirituality is understood as important and influential in the way staff relate to work and engage with each other has a potentially significant effect on how a university practices and understands issues such as community engagement and a wide variety of other issues. In the following discussion we will point out the significance and implications of the spiritual discourse in how Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) sees its mission and suggest some tentative conclusions from this in regards to how it may approach community engagement. The first thing to note in regards to USM's public positon in regards to its direction and ethos is to note the salience and rhetorical importance of the spiritual dimension to well-being and knowledge (USM, 2008, p.25). This is not accidental since Malaysian public policy also recognises a spiritual component as critical to its objectives (MOE, 2007, 2012, 2015). Ibrahim Bajunid puts the point succinctly:

> *'In the Malaysian constitution, Islam is the official religion of the land. Islamic values are, therefore, infused in Civil Service administration. One of the explicit goals of education is the inculcation of universal Islamic values'* (Bajunid, 1995, p.532).

At the rhetorical level there is a clear elaboration of the importance of faith in the way senior academicians view USM. For example Md Salleh Yaapar points out that: *'USM regards knowledge as a form of trust from Allah'* (Yaapar, 2009). Furthermore, in regards to USM's APEX strategy Salleh Yaapar argues, *'the virtues promoted, such as equity, accessibility, availability, affordability and quality; are all compatible with Islam. Its principle regarding the integration of science and arts is also in line with the Islamic principle regarding the unity of knowledge'* (Yaapar, 2009). A good example of the importance of the spiritual dimension to USM's understanding of itself and its purpose can be gleaned from the public pronouncements of the Vice Chancellor of USM. Vice Chancellor Omar Osman points out and captures the importance of the spiritual dimension to USM in the following: *'As an APEX university, USM should consider the diversity of knowledge, including empirical and rational knowledge, and the most essential is the spiritual knowledge'* (Osman, 2013, p.9). Furthermore Omar Osman points out in his yearly address to the USM community that the issue of manners (*adab*) is central to the way in which one shows respect both to the Almighty and to each other (Osman, 2013, p.3). The issue of *adab* as a central way in which people define how they interact points to the salience of spiritual tradition in understanding the whole issue of 'engagement'. The link between manners, spirituality and the way we interact and engage each other is critical to understanding the formation of institutional identity and ethos (Abbes, 2010). In other words good manners is not simply an attribute of individuals but more than that it points back to spiritual values and helps frame how engagement with others is understood and practiced. This is an important point since too often issues such as community engagement seem to be discussed at a level of cultural generality that the contextual nature of the issue in cultural discourse is lost. However it is important to note that in discussing the issue of community engagement in the Malaysian perspective, the spiritual and cultural context is critical since it frames the broader cultural social and moral ecology of institutions and the self-perception of their members (Husin, 2011, 2013; Kling, 1989/1990, 1993).

More broadly speaking in regards to Malaysian culture the cultural framework of *budi-Islam* which helps to define and inform how one interacts with others with 'compromise, tolerance, modesty and forgiveness' (Husin, 2011, p.132) is important to grasp as a critical cultural basis for the rhetoric and practices in Malaysian universities and how they understand issues of community engagement as part of developing a balanced person (*insan seimbang*) (Wan, Sirat, & Razak, 2015, p.271). In the words of Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 2012) we need to have a 'thick' understanding of socio-cultural norms and context within which the discourse of university community engagement manifests. Understood using a culturally thick and contextualized framework the discourse of community engagement, spirituality and the cultural norms of propriety, manners and mores (*adab*) opens us to grasping community engagement not as a instrumentalised discourse devoid of deeper value but rather as a discourse which points to the salience of engagement as a type of spiritual exercise (Hadot, 1998) closely informed by spiritual and cultural values which are central to Malaysian culture (al-Attas, 1980; Kling, 1989/1990, 1993). Understood in reference to a thicker more contextual understanding of the spiritual-cultural norms that informs university community engagement in the context of USM the salience of the spiritual dimension to the discourse of university community engagement becomes more visible.

If the spiritual dimension can be found in the rhetoric of university leaders and in the policy documents written to present and articulate USM to a broader audience does it also translate into the day to day experience of staff and students? How other than in formal rhetoric and in the language of policy documents is it made visible? Ultimately this is one of the most interesting questions especially for those who seek to ground the spiritual dimension and understand it not simply at the rhetorical level but at the socially embedded level as well. A study on the effect and relationship between spirituality and commitment in USM has revealed some interesting findings which point to the importance of spirituality in the effective and

sustainable functioning and achievements of USM (Campbell & Yen, 2014). According to this research there is a strong and positive relationship between spirituality in the workplace and organizational commitment in USM and 'contribution to community' as one of the factors in spirituality at workplace was found to have significant impact on enhancing affective and normative commitment to the goals of the organization (Campbell & Yen, 2014). This finding along with an extensive literature on spirituality in the workplace and organizational commitment (Burack, 1999; Butts, 1999; Garcia-Zamor, 2003; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Kamil, Al-Khatani, & Sulaiman, 2011; Karakas, 2010; Kolodinsky, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2008; Krahnke, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Laabs, 1995) tends to reinforce and confirm the importance of spirituality to workplace values and interactions. Furthermore the importance of spirituality to issues of workplace commitment and the connection between spirituality in the workplace and regard for others and deeper non pecuniary and non-calculative motivations for behaviour suggests that the spiritual dimension is a critical motivational factor in the way in which staff commit to the goals of their organization especially when these goals rely on non-calculative and non-pecuniary motivations to be realised.

One of the great contributors to motivation for engagement with the community lies in an 'other-regarding' sentiment; a habit of the heart; which is influenced by a spiritual commitment to human well-being. Understanding the critical contribution that spirituality has to commitment may be one of the most critical issues in thinking through how to maintain and sustain community engagement in a university. Research which has confirmed the importance of the spiritual dimension to commitment and motivation at work may provide some important input into our understanding of the kinds of motivations that inform successful university community engagement since this engagement is usually viewed in non-instrumental ways and many of the benefits of such engagement are often viewed as intangibles. Understanding the deeper and thicker cultural dimension to 'engagement' helps to make visible the spiritual input and also helps us to avoid simply sliding into accepting the worth value and meaning of community engagement in purely calculative instrumental and quantifiable terms.

Conclusion

The problem of spirituality in higher educational institutions and university community engagement is not simply a philosophical problem but also a very practical issue of making community engagement work effectively and resiliently. The issue is also an important part of the debate over values and ethics in Malaysian higher education more generally (Ali, Salleh, & Sabdin, 2010). A core resource that we have in grounding our commitment to community to something more than 'productivity metrics' lies in taking seriously the spiritual dimension to our lives and our values. The issue of university community engagement must be understood in cultural context and ultimately its justification needs to be sought against principles and values that are deeper and more ennobling than mere increase in numbers. Communities are made up of people, people with values and a sense of dignity and self-worth. The objectification of community which occurs when we view what we do through the lens of quantification and calculation is ultimately dehumanising.

Rene Guenon's critique of the reign of quantity can be read as an early recognition of the deeply dehumanizing and soulless way in which our modern fetish with instrumentalising and quantifying not just things but people stands as a powerful critique of the way in which university community engagement must always be people centred and bound by solid and enduring values. Understood with these considerations in mind the discourse and ethos that informs our understanding of community engagement in USM necessitates a serious consideration of the issue of spirituality and deep thick cultural norms which inform the way we understand and engage community. Spirituality in USM is important not simply from the vantage point of

philosophical search for meaning but as practical contributor to successful engagement. Finally the argument which we made all too briefly is that recognising the importance of the spiritual dimension to university community engagement also connects the university back to its historical roots and this remembering of history and the roots of the mission of a university may constitute one of the most critical moments in recognising the spiritual dimension of community engagement not as an afterthought but as central to the problems of our hearts and our relationships with others. Remembering the roots and centrality of spirituality to how and why we engage and relate to each other may provide a path back for universities to truly engage with and realise what is promised in their foundations which include the development and well-being of all people and the temperance of the soul and cultivating the heart. There are hopeful signs that USM in its approach to community engagement has not forgotten this.

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