Faith diversity at UP: Non-theological arguments

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A good question to test the intentions with "managing" diversity, is to ask: *Is the objective to have one way of "handling" diversity, or will there be a diversity of ways of being and living?*

Another question exposes an often-unacknowledged assumption of our time: *Why is it that "tolerance" is not applied both to the left and to the right?* Uncomfortable as the *left* and *right* (or the *liberal* and *conservative*) labels are (but employing them, and *tolerance*, as shorthand here, just for the moment), this question touches on sensibilities that have shifted within societies. When *conservatives* control societies, the *liberal* plea is always for greater accommodation of *non-conservative ideas and persons*. However, when *liberals* control societies, that same accommodation is often not afforded to *non-liberal ideas and persons*. The strong sense, in societies controlled by *liberals*, is that we have arrived (or that a pinnacle of history has now been reached), and therefore any dissent has to be silenced, be that by means of social pressure (on social media, in corporate policies, etc.) or through laws.

This reflex is distinctly *illiberal*. It shows only superficial commitment to the core ideals of liberalism: the open contestation of all ideas (including *especially* those held to be abhorrent) and of all persons (*ditto*).

To put my proverbial cards on the table: I lean towards the liberal (for metaphysical, philosophical and political reasons), in the classic sense of strongly favouring the maximum freedoms (of thought, speech, movement, etc.) of everyone. The latter includes those who do not afford others such freedoms – traditionally the *right*, but these days, as I say, also the *left* (to employ one last time these uncomfortable labels).

Therefore, the illiberal, that is: oppressive tendencies inherent to any group in power, must by such classical liberalism be identified – as I try to do here – and opposed.

This is even more true within a university, because openness within universities is a barometer of, and influences what happens in this regard within, broader society. The university is an institution that thrives in a truly (rather than

feigned) liberal (again, in the classic sense, i.e. open) environment, but withers in any other type of environment.

As an instance within the University of Pretoria: the circulated material which invited participation in this project, employs some assumptions of the past decades on religion. These suppositions about a secular university, which are now dated, includes (i) that *secular* implies *a-religious* (which is historically inaccurate), (ii) that an a-religious position implies a faith-free position (which is false, akin to claims to objectivity, or more simply, comparable to the claim that one speaks without an accent; in reality, *religionlessness* is as much a position of faith on faith as any other), and (iii) that a secular or a-religious position is a neutral stance taken within democratic societies (which it clearly is not; a secular or a-religious standpoint is by definition an actively taken position on religion, at times even enforced by the armed apparatus of the state, e.g. currently in France, which is one of the democracies on which many others have historically been modelled).

As the next point, the circulated material that invited participation in this project, somehow sets religious tolerance as a positive goal. Whereas religious *intolerance* is inherently impious (and often self-defeatingly anti-religious), defining the goal as *religious tolerance* automatically casts religion within the category of the problematic (which attracts the forbearance of, perhaps, "Ag, nou tóé dan nou ôk maar"), which religion is not.

Further to explain the latter: rather than a uniquely challenging phenomenon, religion is (i) as fully natural as eating, painting, sex, sport, buying and selling are; (ii) as much an evolutionary necessity as language, technology, social bonds and more are; and (iii) as much a part of everyday life as reading, clothing oneself, watching the news or calling a family member are.

Seeing religion as a special case, distinct to the extent that it has to be subject to special measures, is hence unmerited. The mere fact that religion constitutes virtues and acts related more explicitly to the metaphysical than others, cannot, therefore, render it suspect. On a mundane level, all human acts are implicitly filled with the metaphysical, alternatively with the metaphysical-like, which are commonly learnt beliefs as accepted expectations that require no proof. The latter is by no means a confessional point, but is a phenomenological characteristic of daily living.

It is therefore more natural to describe religion as an ordinary expression of humanity.

The term "spirituality" is often used in journalism, for instance, to indicate something akin to religion. This however (probably unintendedly) creates the impression that religion is by definition esoteric, ephemeral, individualist and superficial. A less loaded term is therefore required – one which would reflexively *also* include atheist, agnostic and anti-religious orientations of faith on faith, along with other religiosities found within society. (To be sure, the atheist, agnostic and anti-religious orientations must be afforded continued status of normality, although not in the contrived senses mentioned in (i) to (iii) six paragraphs above, as the world in our time becomes demographically speaking more religious and more conservatively religious. The robust religiosity associated with the latter trends is seldom appreciative of atheist, agnostic and anti-religious orientations of faith on faith.

Possible terms to consider in the place of "religious tolerance" include "religiously open" and "diversely-religiously affirming".

On a related matter of searching for satisfactory terminology: unreflectively using the terminology of equality or non-discrimination in religious expressions can lead to a false idea of consensus. Do we at UP, in our operative distinctions, defer to political correctness *or* to substantive fairness; to exclusive liberalism *or* to inclusive liberalism; to sameness *or* to equality; to values *or* to virtues? (Values are habitually approximated by the language of feelings, *versus* the language of virtues, which relate to groundedness – with this being a central contestation within the currently dawning post-secularity in various parts of the world. Values as used in popular debate often constitute immanently changeable identity markers, which easily function as instruments of rhetorical power. Virtues are deeply held and critically constituted ideals of service within humanity. The latter should therefore be preferred in academic circles.) Do we aim at easy public relations *or* at being true to human relations? (The circulated material which invited participation in this project shows a preference for the latter.) Do we accede to setting religion aside from other matters of life, or do we acknowledge the interrelatedness of these matters? (The circulated material shows a preference for the latter.)

In closing, to clarify two aspects of the distinctions drawn above:

Exclusive liberalism is the *faux liberalism* that tends reflexively to exclude religion from public life, which public life would then comprise public universities too. Inclusive liberalism, on its part, accepts that religion is as much a part of human life as is any other, and therefore affords matters of faith no special

status or position (be that – to trace historically the possibilities – of privilege or exclusion or marginalisation).

In popular, populist or faux liberalism, *sameness* and *equality* are often conflated. However, when *equality* becomes *sameness*, diversity is suppressed.