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Position Paper: How Do we Best Reconcile Religious Differences?

Anthropology 490: Integrative Themes in Anthropology

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The question of “how can we best approach reconciling religious differences?” requires critical thinking, historical evaluation and innovative solutions to provide a substantial answer. The question itself spawns other questions: what is religion and how should it be defined? Is there a line drawn between beliefs and universal morals? Is it possible for anthropologists to completely remove their own biases when evaluating others’ beliefs? Through demonstration of research and post-presentation open discussion, I probed the class to make attempts at devising solutions. Our discussion raised a few possible solutions, the most applicable being increased dialogue between those in conflict, facilitated by religious studies in public education, conflict resolution workshops, and international camps such as Seeds of Change.

My research was made up of scientific articles that ranged from case studies of Finnish schooling systems integrating Islamic curriculum, to the review of cognitive style as a predictor for religious prejudices. The contribution of classroom article suggestions was incorporated into my presentation, and each person’s involvement helped shape the foundation of my approach towards this research. The work samples included highlights of ethnocentrism in congressional speeches, personality trait questionnaires revealing prejudices among those with close-mindedness and case studies of successful conflict resolution workshops. I quickly noticed a pattern in the way scientists identify the underlying themes of religious clashes.

Scholars were similar in the way they reviewed and analyzed data on religious violence. Two main sources of conflict that anthropologists consistently mentioned were cognitive style and external factors. Dialogue emerged as the primary solution to these problems. I addressed each of these concepts and mentioned the implications of understanding each one. For example,

dialogue proved to be an important tactic for mediating conflict that was observed and suggested by anthropologists. Its recurrence in many of the articles highlights that the misunderstandings stemming from lack of communication could predict prejudice, while more communication could lessen the competitive “Othering” that creates an “in-group, out-group” mentality. Cognitive style as a marker for prejudice was also frequently addressed. Anthropologists determined that rigid personalities, closed-mindedness and people’s emotional regulation systems were better indicators for friction, not differences in beliefs. Finally, the external factors affecting those in clashes were frequently addressed for their influences. I mentioned that a culture’s ancestral traditions, ecologies and biological features should not be excluded when reviewing negative religious engagements.

Included in my presentation were examples of previous cases on contrasting beliefs, such as a Jehovah’s Witness boy who was forced to receive a blood transfusion against his parents’ wishes. I identified the irony in Supreme Court Judge Justice James Douglas’s ruling in which he claimed that the boy’s life was of more importance than respecting his parent’s beliefs. This act was not only an exploitation of power, but also a projection of the judge’s belief that all people, at all times and in all cultures, would agree that “saving the boy’s life” was the morally correct decision. Everyone would share identical values of right and wrong if this “pro-life” moral were true in all cultures. Assuming shared universal morals can quickly lead to an underlying ethnocentric attitude, one that sparks conflict, as this example provides.

I continued my presentation by reviewing three specific examples of conflict resolution. First, I discussed Finnish schooling systems balancing differing beliefs by teaching liberal values within an Islamic framework. By identifying their shared ideals, teaching both Islamic and Finnish concepts proved to yield successful coexistence. My second example of a positive

resolution was a camp program called Seeds of Change, in which teenagers belonging to conflicting countries engage in activities that break down prejudices. A third resolution of religious discord that I reviewed was a case involving adults with contrasting beliefs graduating from a series of communication workshops that sought to ease arguments. Graduates ultimately brought action plans back to their multi-religious communities. Each of these methods yielded positive results on mediating conflict.

Classroom discussion was thought-provoking and unremitting. The number of hand raisings and the eager input from each person highlights how religions do, in fact, strike a chord within many of us. We hold our beliefs tightly to ourselves, which is why attaining a one-size-fits-all-solution to conflicts was not fully grasped. We began by discussing relativism. I mentioned not fully understanding infanticide, to which Sidney pointed out that among certain cultures, infanticide is advantageous for increasing inclusive fitness. However, upon first look, it may seem as though mothers are simply killing off their babies. Although, through understanding the culture by its own standards, this behavior appears logical. We related this concept to religious combats; we must understand others' beliefs by the standards of their own cultures and environments. We recognized that gaining awareness about others can be accomplished through increased communication, or by sharing the work of anthropologists who can discover, explain and share cultural knowledge.

Many of us shared our thoughts on child autonomy while reviewing the case of the Jehovah's boy being forced to receive a blood transfusion, against his family's beliefs. We acknowledged that within a medical context, our society promotes equal rights for all, except for children. We posed the question of if children are cognitively capable of making their own medical and religious decisions. Our cultural perspective of child innocence took shape when

Dave offered that he once told children a fictitious phenomenon of chocolate milk deriving from chocolate cows, to which the kids believed him. Keeping in mind the innocence and persuadable attributes of children, we addressed the problem of the powerful, who are adults in this case, pressing their beliefs onto the vulnerable. The solution to the overpowering of children would call for a cultural change in the way our society views child innocence. We also discussed the legal obligation medical professionals have in the case of giving life-saving blood transfusions. Doctors are obligated, by the law, to treat their patients. This law is a construct that upholds and supports certain people's ideals but not everyone's. A possible solution to adjust the legal system to allow multi-religious respect. We acknowledged that this solution, however, is not easily achieved.

Resolutions to religious conflicts may not always entail taking action. A certain solution is to take no action. Sam proposed the idea of, "you do your thing over here", while others "do their thing over there," as leave-everyone-alone approach toward handling different beliefs. Although, Dr. Cassaniti pointed out that inaction may be against one's beliefs. For example, if I believed that not informing someone of my religion would inevitably lead to that person living an eternal life of misery, then my lack of action would be wrong. Nonetheless, a hands-off approach was entertained as a possible solution to religious conflict.

While we explored possible conflict solutions, the idea of gaining knowledge about other people's cultures, lives and beliefs outnumbered all other propositions that were made. Many of us reworded the same belief that by understanding the environments, ancestral traditions, and cultures of those who are different from us, we can better get along with them. This concept is one we have deemed applicable to most people and is utilized by Seeds of Change. Chris pointed out that it is a lack of understanding about others that leads to conflict, which was supported

through data found by numerous anthropologists. Anna brought forth the concept of unifying core values as a way of mediating religious battles, which was proven helpful in the case study on Islamic Finnish students. A few of us offered the idea of multi-religious studies being implemented in public schooling systems. Ultimately, each solution involves an increased dialogue between people in order to identify their shared values, as a means of reducing prejudices and conflicts.

In all, our focused discussion on mediating religious conflicts was insightful but somewhat inconclusive. We differed with ideas on child autonomy and the goals of religious preaching. As a group, we struggled to come up with solutions on how to eradicate the ethnocentric principals that the powerful project onto others. We also entertained the idea of taking no action in the case of differing beliefs. Though, the importance of dialogue was unanimously supported by us all and could be achieved through incorporation of religious studies in public education and more resolution workshops among teenagers and adults. The possibility of increased communication feels tangible, as it is a simple concept that could reveal underlying shared values, lessen rigidity among people with close-minded cognitive styles, and mediate the complex conflict of differing beliefs.