

Reflection Paper 2

This introductory course to the scholarship of religions has helped me mature my analysis of human religious expression. The search for a definition of religion is engaging, and recognizing family traits for this human phenomenon adds to my perspective. My research and interview paper asked the question of how Islam is expressed in the South Asian cultural and ethnic context. The wider issue explored is how ethnicity and religion work together in forming a particular religious identity. The spiritual ideal that I found in myself and others is to seek a religious identity before an ethnic one. This presumes that a relationship before a divine/Ultimate reality should not be overly influenced by race or secular culture. However, I found that this assumption is not necessarily wise to make. Religion is the subject of humanity's relationship with the Divine, and thus the human element is an essential element in what makes religion meaningful to a scholar of "Homo religioso". Religion's study of Divinity and Ultimate Reality is almost always in the context of humanity looking upon something supernatural or spiritual in the world. Thus, I feel that I must abandon my earlier intellectual practice of completely discounting ethnicity of being of any lasting importance.

I found cultural identity to be an extremely important factor in shaping religious practice and ultimately religious dogma. In this indirect fashion, culture and ethnicity do have a meaningful effect on the adherent of any faith. The Lakota Sioux from Black Elk's account showed the most dramatic ties between culture and religion, as their identity as a nation before the involved spirits of the earth starkly set them apart religiously from the European Americans.

Buddhism perhaps showed the least direct influence of culture, as holding onto an ethnic identity would be merely another obstacle to extinguishing oneself. Still, the religious environment of Hindu South Asia did play a great role in bringing about the Buddha's path to Enlightenment. The spread of Islam is also tied to the ethnic and cultural dynamics of Arabia. The growing Islamic world typically retained elements of the local culture, thus bringing about a great assimilation of endemic culture and Arab-Islamic faith. With the interconnecting identities of religious and ethnicity/culture, I found it difficult to dissect the two human factors in a scholarly. Taking the two as a whole is a much more holistic manner in which to study religion in humanity.

In re-examining the definition of religion, I found that my personal form of classifying it has narrowed substantially. I typically considered an atheistic worldview to be a religion in of itself with its own set of dogma. While atheism does have many tenets of faith like a religion, it is lacking in many of the forms that create the richness of faith that make religion a wholesome experience to study. I now believe that atheism, agnosticism, and humanism to not be complete enough in their assertions of the Divine/Ultimate Reality to be studied as religions; rather, I consider them to be more philosophical in explaining the human experience. However, I do recognize the study of new religious movements, albeit in less depth considering their limited scope of history and change. Many of marginalized faiths that choose to be recognized as religions should be considered so both for ideals of self-identification and having a set of beliefs. Atheism and agnosticism, however, typically reject the label of religion.

Regarding my views of ethnicity and religion regarding my own faith, I am still dissatisfied with the overly cultural emphasis that Christianity often receives. While social prevalence of a religion itself is not negative, the focus on extrinsic practice has the potential to

...towards insincerity in conflict with scriptural teachings. However, I respect religion's role in shaping cultural identity and I recognize the importance of observing them concurrently in religious scholarship. American culture profoundly alters the expression of American Christianity, and in this sense culture does alter spirituality in the western world.

I appreciate my experience in this class also for the joy of learning about various religious expressions in meaningful depth. The study of Native American traditions expanded the conventional perception of religion. This faith is often romanticized to the point that it hardly resembles the reality of the religion, and the realistic first-hand account of Black Elk lighted upon many of the practical forms of religious expression. Buddhism was also meaningful to me as I came to understand what anatman was and that Buddhists. The Buddhist reverence for Ultimate reality and the dismissal of the question of the Divine was also profoundly interesting. I already was familiar with the practices and beliefs of Islam from previous studies, but the dimension of cultural identity cast new light on this faith. This human aspect of monotheism also allowed me to connect to my own faith at a new level. Perhaps most significant are the similarities that I discovered between the different religious traditions. While east religion is unique and different in fundamental ways, the common concern for the human condition pervaded all three of them. The Lakota Sioux tradition sought to save its people from immediate political and cultural destruction, Buddhism diagnosis an endless cycle of pain and rebirth while offering a diagnosis, and Islam offers escape from eternal judgment. They all recognize a problem with humanity and provide different answers.

The scholarly pursuit of religion is an important tool for understanding humanity. I have been personally enriched by this intellectual journey and I have a greater appreciation for answering difficult and complex questions. Being able to analyze and weigh the quality of

standards for definitions has been a valuable practice. This has complemented my critical thinking skills regarding abstract subject matter and I have also been able to connect the skills from this class to my world in general.

Thank you for this thoughtful reflection.

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