

Cultural Differences and the Fundamental Humanity

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Abstract:

While some aspects of culture may appear disagreeable, understand that others may view parts of ones own culture similarly. People and cultures may agree or disagree with a particular aspect or belief. There are certain universal truths among all people, and that includes the right to live, right to liberty and right to happiness. It is the foundation of the United States, but it is also the fundamental premise of humanity. Group psychologies play a large part of how groups view aspects of cultures. If fundamental rights are observed and differences are accepted rather than scorned, then the cultures will advance.

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This is what we must fight to protect. If the actions of a person, people or culture deny a fundamental right, then there is a responsibility to call attention to it and work to reform it. There is a rational principle at work here, but the fundamental rights are always observed. Of the particular example of sharing a wife as a friendship gesture, there are cultures in Africa, the Old Testament and elsewhere that regard similar behavior as just. In the example, the wife's wishes, health and liberty are generally disregarded. The question is begged of the example, who is more morally just and why?

The question should be considered in terms of whose rights should be considered, which rights are more important and whose rights have more importance? Logically, the right to life is the most precious of the three. Without life, one does not have liberty and cannot pursue happiness. When do one's rights override or supercede another's? If you follow a utilitarian principle, the objective is to obtain the maximum good. If someone's desire for happiness or the maximum good leads to the death of another or infringes upon their liberty, is it just? If people are deserving of the same fundamental rights and equal treatment, then the exemplified gesture is wrong.

Over the span of time, cultural differences have been the spark of great wars and mass genocide. A culture that marks itself as superior in any respect will condemn aspects of other

culture and its people. This can lead to bloody hostilities over inconsequential differences. As evidenced by the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Homer, the Greeks regarded themselves superior and among the favor of gods. They furthermore regarded the Persians as lesser beings when Alexander the Great conquered Asia. Today, the PEW Global Attitudes Project illustrates an example of cultural tensions in its discussion of how Islamic extremism is a concern for those where Islam is not the primary religion (PEW, 2005). Again, the difference is from within the perspective given.

History has taught us the remarkable power of cultural disagreements. Nazis accused Jews for being unclean, greedy and seductive, and subsequently used that reasoning to condemn over 6 million to death. American Indians were killed and moved off lands in order to protect the rights of westward moving settlers and to protect the American culture from the "savages". Slavery was defended as a necessary part of the southern way of life even though it robbed millions of liberty or even of life. Japanese murdered countless Chinese during World War II because they thought they had the superior culture. The KKK quotes the Bible to defend its bloody white supremacy message of hate. They portray a paranoid image of white culture. (Kimmel, 2000)

Cultures and groups that have many of the same beliefs are in the midst of conflict. Why is that Muslims, Jews and Christians fight against each other when they believe in many of the same principles? It is however the association with a different religion that causes the strife in many cases. If one looks within a particular group, there is a fight brewing as well between different sects or people. In the midst of these fights, principles get lost while trivial differences rapidly develop into boiling point issues. The view that they do not hold the same traditions as we do or they have dirty customs overwhelms the rational thoughts with a sense of absolute

righteousness. (It is ironic since most religions consider idolatry to be wrong.) The issues become dangerous when the group invokes the belief that, by divine proclamation, they are the chosen ones and thus, the belief turns into we are divinely superior.

The central cause is us vs. them (otherwise termed, good guys vs. bad guys), and of course, we (us) are always the good guys. Us and them mentality creates negative stereotypes and drives any resulting hostility between groups. It is the basis of the inter-group psychology and Henri Tajfel's social identity theories describing ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination. (Billig, 1981)

Learning and understanding differences is the key to accepting cultures and the unique individuals around us. Acceptance of other cultures is essential to cooperation. Furthermore, cooperation can be the difference between a successful organization or group and one that is not. When cultures cooperate, they learn from and trade with each other and together increase.

Robert Wright describes how the trade routes from China to Europe helped to foster the spreading of knowledge through different cultures trading with each other. He also states that barbarian tribes were less moral and less civilized is one misconception among many. (Wright, 2001) Without acceptance and cooperation, tensions rise between the cultures when they resort to the ingroup and outgroup mentality, which discredits mutual benefits. We can go forward when we work together instead of concentrating upon the differences between us.

Conclusion

While it may be difficult to understand a custom of a particular culture, we can question and learn about them. Group dynamics help to shape our interactions as a culture with other cultures, but we can help to move that in a positive direction. In a completely utilitarian ethic, an action is deemed good depending upon the amount of benefit you receive from it. Yet, balance

must be understood because too much of a good thing is not necessarily a good thing. From a group perspective, the needs of the group outweigh those of the one, but not all needs of the group benefit the one and not all needs are actual needs. If fundamental rights are observed and differences are accepted rather than scorned, then the cultures will advance. If fundamental rights are threatened or disregarded, it is up to us to help educate those whom disregard or threaten, or we risk tragedies of epic proportions.

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