

Issues Concerning Religious Tolerance and Diversity

By

Mary Courtis, Anthropology Instructor and Chris Cayton, Philosophy Instructor

Portland Community College
Oregon

Introduction

Religious Tolerance refers to the ability to appreciate spiritual values, beliefs and practices which are different from your own. This goal is a complex one due the great diversity of religions and spiritual beliefs existing in the world today. Religion is also a very emotional topic. It can often be difficult for individuals to put their personal biases aside and consider ideas or situations objectively. There is also an ongoing debate between theorists who favor cultural/ethical relativism (the idea that the “moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times” -John Ladd, Ethical Relativism) and those who favor the idea that all human beings share an inherent sense of right and wrong, which can be determined objectively. Given these difficulties and controversies, any discussion of religion in the classroom or other educational settings can present special challenges.

To help instructors address some of these issues, a dialogue concerning religious tolerance between two PCC professors in anthropology and philosophy is shown below. This dialogue could become a subject for class discussion in itself, or specific questions from the dialogue could be adapted to help instructors zero in on concerns in their own discipline. i.e. a political science instructor might want to ask: what are the political consequences of religious tolerance or intolerance? This dialogue should be used to stimulate class discussion prior to viewing the Illumination Project presentation.

Dialogue on Religious Tolerance

Anthropology Instructor Mary Courtis and PCC Philosophy Instructor Chris Cayton

Courtis:

Popular culture often suggests that we avoid talking to others about politics and religion. What is it about the ways people are socially conditioned or enculturated that makes discussing these topics difficult? What are some ways that we as a campus or global community might begin to move beyond our own personal values/biases as individuals in order to expand our understanding and tolerance of different religious values and practices?

Cayton:

These are very interesting questions which will encourage students to think about themselves and the assumptions about religious truths that they and others frequently make. I think that it is important the students think about the relationship between cultural bias and religious bias and

these questions get to that issue. However, the question concerning “understanding and tolerance of different religious values and practices” is itself based on two assumptions that I think need to be examined. Does greater understanding necessarily lead to greater tolerance? And is greater tolerance necessarily a good thing?

Personally, I can think of one religious practice which I think cannot and should not be tolerated: suicide bombings. I don’t think bombing abortion clinics and murdering doctors who perform abortions should be tolerated either and yet those actions are justified on grounds of religious belief. Should a child be allowed to die, despite the fact that proper medication will cure her, because her parents believe that only prayer and belief in God can heal their child? There are lots of situations that give us pause to wonder whether or not tolerance is a good thing. Should any action be allowed just because it entails someone’s religious belief?

So the underlying issue here it seems to me is: how do we distinguish between what should and should not be tolerated?

Courtis:

Enculturation is recognized as an emotional as well as intellectual process. List 3 attitudes or practices that belong to a different religious group than your own that you find personally offensive. To what extent does your emotional reaction to these attitudes or practices interfere with your ability to discuss and evaluate them objectively? In your opinion is it even possible to be objective about topics that you find personally offensive? How does emotionalism contribute to religious oppression or help to maintain it?

Cayton:

This brings to my mind a wonderful Platonic dialogue called Euthyphro. Euthyphro is a man who considers himself a very pious and righteous man, who knows and obeys the will of the Gods. The setting itself is interesting because the encounter takes place on the steps leading into the tribunal where Socrates is going to stand trial for charges which he will be found guilty of and sentenced to death. Euthyphro is also going to court to accuse his own father of murder. In a situation where anyone else would be pulling their hair out, Socrates nonchalantly engages Euthyphro in a dialogue about the nature of religious piety and truth. During the dialogue Socrates poses this question:

*“Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious,
or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”*

Another way of posing the same question, but with a slightly different focus, would be: “Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God?” Many people believe that this question successfully refutes divine command theory of morality and yet, Martin Luther King appealed to a version of divine command theory in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. But I also have a video of a young Palestinian man who master-minded and executed the bombings of three busloads of people in Israel and who firmly

believes that he could not have succeeded if God had not been with him and helped him. Was he right or wrong to do what he did?

All of that was just background explanation for my next question: “What is the relationship between moral action and religious belief? Is something right just because God says it is right? Can a person be morally good without holding any belief in God? Can a true believer in God commit an act that is morally wrong?”

Underlying these questions is an even more fundamental question: Is it possible to identify a moral or religious principle that is objectively true? Are there moral values that are common to all religious experience? The three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, view themselves as having exclusive claim to divine truth. The followers of these three religions have been at each others throats forever. What is it about the religious experience that causes people to be so intolerant? Is religious belief, any religious belief, inherently intolerant? Intolerance often leads to violence, so a closely related question, but one that is certainly relevant, is: What is the relationship between religious the experience and violence? How does religious belief affect our relationships with others?

Post Illumination Project Performance Questions

Religious oppression is often rooted in enculturation patterns that promote cultural bias. In the Illumination Project play identify the role cultural bias has in supporting different types of religious oppression.

- What are the religious perspectives of the various characters in the play?
- How does the lack of understanding or appreciation for other religious viewpoints lead to religious prejudice, discrimination or oppression in the play?
- How did the religious beliefs of the characters in the play affect their relationships with others?
- Where did you see intolerance being displayed during the play?
- What is the religious and ethical principle involved in the conflict?
- What is it that the characters who displayed intolerance do not understand?
- Do you think that the other characters in the play reacted well to the intolerance being displayed? How should the characters have reacted to the conflict?

Pick a character in the Illumination Project play who expresses a different religious perspective than your own. Try to think, see and experience the world according to this religious viewpoint.

- How does your understanding of reality, the divine and other people change?
- What value does trying on different spiritual viewpoints have for increasing your appreciation for other religions?

Other Questions:

- What where the different religious perspectives represented in the play?
- Have you ever explored and tried to understand a different religious perspective than your own? If so, how did that affect your understanding of the followers of that religion?
- Can anything be gained by learning something about other religious experiences?
- Did you learn anything about religious intolerance from participating in this play?

Internet Resources:

<http://collegefreedom.org/religion.htm> - This site addresses the issue of academic freedom from a variety of perspectives. Scrolling down the page will take you to a link (<http://collegefreedom.org/religion.htm>) which offers a list of articles dealing with a variety of issues, such as: "Academic Freedom and the Rights of Religious Faculty;" "In God We Trust in the Classroom;" "Academic Freedom, Creationism, and the Meaning of Democracy;" "Academic Freedom on Religious Campuses;" etc.

<http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/index.htm> - This site also has some good articles: "My Religious College, My Secular Profession;" "Faith Statements Do Restrict Academic Freedom;" "The Value of Limitations- Is religion an academic liability?" etc.

http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_defn.htm - This website touts itself as being "unlike almost all other religious sites: It promotes religious freedom, and diversity as positive cultural values."

It does not address academic issues per se, but is a terrific resource for a variety of issues related to religious intolerance: abortion, assisted suicide, death penalty, gay rights and gay marriage, sex and gender, etc. With links to articles and websites all dealing with those issue.

It also offers brief descriptions of various religions.

The site also offers a glossary of terms that is very useful.

It also offers links to other websites that have information on the concepts being discussed. So this is a really nice internet resource.

<http://chronicle.com/colloquy/2002/05/religious/> - From the Chronicle of Higher Education, a colloquy dealing with the question: "Do professors give up academic freedom when they sign religious colleges' faith statements? How can religious colleges protect faculty members' academic freedom?"

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0606/p01s03-legn.html> - An article in The Christian Science Monitor (June 06, 2005) entitled "Conservatives see liberal bias in class - and mobilize"

<http://www.leaderu.com/real/ri9203/court1.html> - In a sweeping decision in June, the Supreme Court decided not to hear the case of physiology professor Bishop, along with several cases involving bans on religious freedoms. Christian faculty in the 11th circuit-Georgia, Florida, and Alabama-and across the country question how this will affect expression of their faith in the classroom.

<http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/> - the famous (or infamous) website The Students for Academic Freedom Information Center. It is "a clearing house and communications center for a national coalition of student organizations whose goal is to end the political abuse of the university and to restore integrity to the academic mission as a disinterested pursuit of knowledge."

http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Students_for_Academic_Freedom – A website that is critical of Students for Academic Freedom. They say that it is just "an offshoot of the [Center for the Study of Popular Culture](#) and the brainchild of [David Horowitz](#)"