Culture: religion and identity

What is the impact that religion has on secular culture? In what ways do cultural elements affect the life and experience of religious groups? Religion is a profound aspect of most people's lives and would therefore tend to affect how groups of people live. The more apparent aspects of cultural life influenced by religion are how the " holy days" are popularly celebrated, especially Christmas and Easter. There are, however, more subtle influences that religion has on culture which, in turn affects certain groups.

I believe that the most controversial issue dealt with by religion has to do with how society views gender roles, because this is where the greatest religious debates center on. For instance, religion has created ambiguous attitudes towards homosexuality and same sex marriage; there are, however, differences in attitudes of different cultures despite similarity in religion, suggesting that religious orientations are tempered by a nation's cultural context (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009: 338). Thus, Christians may accept or reject homosexuality depending upon their national culture. There were also studies on society's attitudes towards gender roles and feminism being affected by religion. Surprisingly, more Muslim women are comfortable identifying themselves as feminists because according to them, Islamic teaching supports feminist principles. Christian women, on the other hand, are less willing to endorse feminism (Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson & Leathers, 2008: 38). Religion also is likely to influence gender inequality in education, with discrimination against girls being strong in Muslim-dominant countries (Cooray & Potrafke, 2010: 1), something I also gathered during my interview with Amber (see previous journal entry).

Religion could also influence pro-environment behaviours and attitudes. A general sense of spirituality and belief in the soul are found to influence

individuals to take a greater concern for the conservation of the environment. Religious belief systems contribute in the creation of public goods and thereby affect economic behaviour (Owen & Videras, 2007: 54). Spirituality and religious attendance have also been associated with decreased probability of suicidal inclinations. Religion and spirituality are likewise shown to be significant factors in decreased rates of mental illness. It was originally thought that the social supports provided by religious affiliations may be at work in reducing suicidal incidents, but a study found that even without the social affiliations, spirituality and profound belief in God still reduced suicidal tendencies (Rasic, et al., 2008).

Religion, aside from influencing people to value their lives, also helps them face illness and inevitable death, in the manner their culture conditions them to. A study was conducted among a sample of respondents composed of Black Carribean patients, and another sample of respondents comprised of White British patients, all suffering from cancer. The respondents in both groups were all Christians. The purpose of the study was to explore how religion and spirituality affected how they perceived their cancer experience. The study found that patients in both ethnic groups derived benefits from their religious faith and belief in God, but they differed in how they understood and expressed their experience with cancer were shaped by their respective cultures. Overall, the strength of religious belief appeared to be more pronounced among Black Caribbean patients, who saw their experience with cancer as a preparation or transition from their earthly existence, bringing them closer to God. For White British patients, they principally perceived their religious faith as a source of support, particularly through their religious communities. (Koffman, et al., 2008: 780).

The foregoing are but a few examples of how religion affects a people's culture system their attitudes, norms and beliefs. The way I see it, religion imbues a culture with the attitudes and beliefs that enable a people to cope with their reality. Religion permeates all aspects of people's lives, and will continue to do so through the succeeding generations.

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