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Religious Traditions

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Interview Reflection

On November 15th, I had the utmost pleasure of interviewing a fellow student at Bridgewater College about their Religious beliefs and traditions. My interviewee was a senior international student who had come to the US from the West Bank of Palestine. She was raised in a Sunni Muslim household with numerous practices that permeate all aspects of society and community at home. Growing up my interviewee spent time attending mosques, engaging in prayer, and committing to the various yearly traditions in Islam. The vast majority of the populace in Palestine is Sunni Muslim; however, there is a strong Christian minority. The area where my interviewee was raised is known worldwide as having many sacred religious sites for all Abrahamic religions, so history and tradition are deeply intertwined with daily life in the area.

For my interviewee, the most important factor impacting her religiosity was a sense of Belonging. Ben Marcus first detailed the 3B Framework, which stands for Belief, Behavior, and Belonging. The 3B Framework is an important tool for understanding and analyzing the various facets of religion that impact intellect, practices, and social relationships (PP1 Defining Religion). Belonging allowed my Interviewee to feel connected to her religion and people, as described by her influence of community, school, and family elements on spirituality. When coming to the US, there was no longer a presence of a family and community element, leading to an alienation from her common spiritual practices back home. Without her usual support system that brought her

peace and comfort, it was more difficult to connect with the beliefs and behaviors that so commonly defined at home. What struck me more about this strong relation to the Social Dimension of religion was that holidays were especially difficult for my interviewee. The community that she grew so accustomed to is no longer around, and it leads to an alienation from the celebrations that were common back home. She further elaborates that although there is a Mosque nearby, “you need to live with those people in order to feel what you feel like back home.” This is quite interesting as she describes a sort of energy or emotion when there is solidarity in the traditions of a particular culture. I believe Emile Durkheim describes this feeling as a collective effervescence, a sense of connection to something larger than themselves. He observed that rituals bring together people for shared emotional and physical experiences that strengthen social bonds(Social Dimension PP). Because she has traveled halfway across the world and ventured into a culture and religious demographic much different than her own, this causes feelings of estrangement.

My interviewee highlighted the various aspects of the Social Dimension that permeate all aspects of life at home. Aspects of Islam are deeply intertwined within social and political settings, dictating what is morally and ethically correct in the community. She details that when it comes to punishment and law, scriptural doctrine dictates various decisions made in society. There is also an emphasis on hierarchical leadership, where Shayks and Imams, who are very knowledgeable in Islamic law and theology, provide ethical and spiritual guidance to their respective communities(Basics of Islam PP). In class, Islam was used as an example for the Social Dimension, most likely due to its strong ability to foster a sense of *communitas* and shared identity among followers. The participant details various shared values of Islam that are practiced in Palestinian society; however, one stood out to me more than others, “A good

relationship with neighbors leads to a promised place in heaven.” This shows that there is a reward for those who strengthen the bonds among their peers in a locality, improving their social networks and building lasting friendships. The interviewee appeared to be very proud of the various social hubs and acts of community service that instill pride within the values she has been raised with.

The individual then details her experiences with rituals and traditions growing up. Firstly, Muslims worldwide observe Ramadan as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community. Since a young age, my interviewee has been part of this yearly tradition, which she speaks highly of. Ramadan, in her experience, included extensive reading of the Qur’an and an increase in prayer within the community. She further details that this experience allows her to reach Altered States of consciousness, where fasting, meditation, and prayer induce this feeling of wholeness and connection within the soul to everything around them, giving her meaning. She expressed the importance of patience and reflection, improving self-intuition and spiritual growth. The various practices that lead to spiritual purification, gratitude, and community bonding teach discipline to all participants while providing a feeling of rebirth and sanctification. Freud details that the induction of altered states returns people to earlier stages for comfort, refuge, and purer states of mind, which I believe my interviewee is experiencing during Ramadan (Oases of Mind PP). Another tradition that she has been a part of is the Islamic Celebration of Eid al-Adha, which is known as the festival of sacrifice which carries spiritual significance and is considered a blessing. During this important rite of the Islamic religion, a sheep is sacrificed and given as an offering to please Allah. My interviewee details her first experience with Eid al-Adha as one that brought her mild discomfort, though she reassures the commemoration of the significant Quranic

story of Abraham. It is evident that this sort of story is not one she is necessarily proud of describing because of Western notions of sacrifice and misconceptions about Islamic traditions.

The interviewee is then asked to describe the various sacred spaces and objects that allow her to connect more deeply with her spirituality. The Holy Mosque in Jerusalem is one of the most important religious sites for Muslims worldwide after Mecca and Medina. She describes her experience entering the mosque for the first time as an instant peace and tranquility. The interviewee details, "I felt all the uneasiness in my body go away" and a strong connection to the energy and divine presence in that holy space. Macgregor argues that spaces are made holy by the presence and prayers of previous generations, in which the energy infused into the sacred space gives it vitality and a life force(House of God PP). She describes the space as having qualities that are able to absorb the negative energy accumulated in the body and instill faith in Allah to ease personal worries. The sacredness of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem can be described through two theoretical trends, the first being the phenomenological, which is a place that quivers with an enchanted affective energy. The second is the political approach, where religious spaces are the product of human factors and represent socio-political contexts. The combination of these two theories provides a space that is divine and cleansing to a visitor. My interviewee highlighted that there are not many objects that bring her comfort or luck apart from a travel-sized Qur'an that she keeps in her room. She explains, "As long as it is in the same room as me, I sleep well." This statement highlights the agency the Qur'an has over my interviewee, which is one of comfort and happiness. As Alfred Gell explains, for Object Agency to exist, it must make some sort of real impact on the mental and physical states of humans (Object Agency PP). This object exerts power and influence over a person; like many other followers of Islam, this sacred text evokes certain responses from individuals and their societies.

Throughout this Interview, it was very apparent that the theories we learned in class have various applications in explaining the psychological and social elements that affect religious belief and spirituality. Throughout the interview, many references were made concerning the Social, Material, Doctrinal, and Ritual Dimensions. It was exciting to see the confirmation of various forms of course content and how the theorists involved were able to provide definitions for the various mysteries of religion. Throughout the interview, my participant appeared slightly nervous; perhaps this may have been her first time being asked these kinds of questions that critically assess her personal beliefs and experiences. However, she seemed very proud and joyful that she had the ability to speak of her culture and heritage to me, and as I acted more intrigued, the individual began to open up more. This interview was truly an experience that put me outside of my comfort zone. I have never spent time talking and analyzing an individual's experience with religion, and hearing the history of a culture from the other side of the world was eye-opening and fascinating. The knowledge of religion and spirituality I've attained from this class has allowed me to understand further my own faith and the sheer number of cross-references present in interfaith connectedness. Being from a foreign culture, I feel that the need to conform to various societal norms in the United States is no easy feat and alienation from what we are raised with causes spiritual conflict that can harm the soul. However, by analyzing the theories and psychology of others, I realize that all humans deal with the same challenges, and finding answers to what we are destined for is the hardest thing to do in this reality. The only way to truly find answers that provide comfort is through empathy and love for all ideas, including those that one may already have preexisting notions about.