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| virginia military institute |
| Reflective Essay |
| ERH 211X Comparative Religions |
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| **Andrew Gazzillo** |
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Reflecting upon my Comparative Religions class I realized I took hold of much more than simply syllabi related materials. The class introduced Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism and directly compared the differences of each faith when contrasted to one another. However, simply understanding the facts of a particular religion does not lead to a full appreciation of the culture. Mr. Bailey challenged me to become not just a student of culture but an anthropologist, analyzing the impact of culture and ask the “why?” question to the function of religion beyond its foundations within the culture of civilizations.

Anthropology is defined as the study of humans; their interactions, behaviors, and most importantly culture to include religion. Before this class I was completely unaware of the meaning of anthropology and how it could be applied outside of the class. Our class discussions and lectures would begin with our own understanding of the religion to establish a basis built upon what we already know. Upon gathering our foundation our professor, Mr. Bailey, would share his own experiences and provide the class with facts that make up the religion, its origins, and traditions. However it was after this introduction and lesson from the instructor where we received the challenge to explore further. The class would not just discover the religion itself, but also the significance of its impact within cultural traditions. One exercise we performed in class was an analysis of clothing websites and how even in the 21st century traditionalism has evolved within certain religions, and held its ground in others. It amazed me how something we hardly notice today like clothing continues to defy culture and how civilizations have modernized. For example, Islamic culture is extremely modernized in countries like Morocco, but in other theocratic countries like Iran women are still subject to traditional full dress, black burqas. Another method of learning was through the presentations. Cadets had the flexibility to cover virtually any topic within the religion. I was too quick to assume this would lead to extremely broad presentations worth little value. However, I was happily misled. Our professor challenged us to dig up the unusual, and we did. I became familiar with Hindu temples and gods, Buddhist monks, Christian prophets, and Islamic worship. The tiniest details, whether it was a ceremony along the Ganges, or a modern/classical hijab, are all essential pieces culture, and the vast amount of which is made up of religion.

My newly found appreciation for anthropology and the observance of culture through religion was put to use much quicker than I could have anticipated. On a trip to Washington D.C. just this past February I began to notice things that would never have occurred to me before this class. At the hotel my group was staying at there was a Pakistani wedding reception during our stay. Normally I would have minded my own business but the nature of their ceremony drew to me. I was so captivated by the traditional music, the colors, and dance, and the clothing of this occasion. Before this Comparative Religions class, I would never have wondered why the bride wore green. I would never have taken notice to the western suits and hairstyles of the men from a country drowning in tradition. I would never have previously possessed the nerve to ask one of their elders about the symbolism behind the colors, and dress. I would have never cared about their culture. However, our professors challenge to keep us asking questions, and simple curiosity led me to having an interesting cross-cultural conversation with gentlemen from seeming worlds apart.

The class also led me down a path of internal observation. Not only was I taking notice of other cultures, but I found myself detecting elements of my own culture and religion that I had not considered previously. Take for example the Crucifix I wear around my neck every day. No statement in the Bible or within any Catholic doctrine states I have to wear a symbol of my beliefs. When people see someone like me wearing a symbol like this, they immediately jump to conclusions about an individual’s or my own culture. They will determine I am some denomination of Christian, go to church, pray, and plenty of other stereotypes. Who would have thought the amount of culture being spread from one human being to another? One exercise we performed in class was a session of meditation. The goal of this session was to take advantage of silence within a peaceful atmosphere to internalize your thoughts. I specifically remember utilizing this experience to internalize my relationship with my own beliefs. With all the hassles of the surrounding world, I truly appreciated the lesson of this class to slow down, stop, and reflect upon your beliefs and relationship with God or whomever you worship.

Looking back upon this past semester I have opened my eyes to culture in a manner I had never expected. I would have never believed at the start of the semester that I would have the nerve to approach Muslims from Pakistan as a military cadet of the United States. The guilt felt for having such tunnel vision and closed mindedness haunts me. This is a class that should be studied by all future officers. I did not view the Islamic population as anything but the enemy until this class. I never questioned my own faith and history before this semester. Every person on planet Earth is still a human. They breathe like me, laugh like me, and have values just as I do. A grade is but a letter on a report card, but the understanding of different religions and culture through the undertaking of an anthropologic initiative will mold my experiences with others forever.