Religious Differences or Religious Similarities?

History teaches us that religion plays a major role in society worldwide. Religious differences have led to wars and violent groups. I, however, believe many similarities exist within different religions, and the root of many conflicts may not be religious whatsoever. Many religious conflicts are caused because people are religiously illiterate. This may be because people's knowledge of religion comes from the media and/or from an upbringing in a singularly religious home. As Thomas G. Plante states in "A Commentary on Religious Conflicts and a Call for a Focus on the Best the Traditions have to Offer:"

> We hear about only the very worst that various members of the religious traditions have to offer. We hear a lot about the Islamic terrorists and not about peace loving Muslims. We hear about the 4% of priest who sexually abuse minors but nothing about the 96% of priests who do not. We hear about Jewish and Arab violence but not about peaceful collaboration between and within these groups.

The media tends to show the negative and unfortunate events that happen within different religions and not enough of the similarities, positivity, and hope these different religious groups have. Because of the media's portrayal, many easily conclude that the root of all conflict comes from religion. The traditions, languages, and customs may vary drastically; however, they are ultimately teaching similar ideas. This includes kindness towards others, feeling peace and solace through prayer and meditation, being part of something more important and bigger than oneself, and coping better with the stressors of life through particular beliefs and understandings about the world and beyond.

I come from a home that is very religious, but also religiously illiterate. I lived in Amarillo, Texas, and up until four years ago, I didn't really pay much attention to religion. My entire family and I are Catholic. I have friends who came from different religious backgrounds, but other than this I didn't have much knowledge on religion. Religion was never really a topic of conversation within my family or group of friends. This, however, changed when I moved to Utah in junior high. In contrast to Texas, Utah is known for being a state that is LDS dominant, and it was something extremely different than I had ever known. I had no idea what the LDS religion stood for; I didn't even known it existed. This caused some conflict with the people that I was now surrounded by because I was looked at differently for not sharing the same beliefs. I too saw them differently for not sharing my beliefs. I then realized how religiously illiterate I had been. Not only did it cause conflict with others, but it caused conflict within me. I felt like I had to act differently around the people who were different than I was and that was a challenge for me because I felt like an outcast. As I came to see many similarities in values and beliefs, I overcame those factors because I learned to respect everyone's decisions and even see a new kind of culture. Regardless of everyone's choices, moving to Utah has made me realize there is so much more in the world that I have yet to learn about. If people were willing to open their minds, they could learn to respect each other's religious decisions just as I have come to do.

Not one religion is right or wrong, although the mentality that one religion is the right one over any other religion is what causes conflict between people, and countries. A famous nineteenth century Hindu religious teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, once said:

> God has made different religions to suit different aspirations, times, and countries.
>
> All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself.
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> Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted

devotion. One may eat a cake with icing either straight or sideways. It all tastes sweet either way.

As I move from high school to college, I know that I will come across many people that have different beliefs than I do. Students come from all over the world to attend college and I will come across the religiously illiterate, but if I could show them that many religions have many similarities I know it can change people's way of thinking.

Church and state must be separated, and religion hasn't been allowed in schools. If someone had enough motivation to stand up and show a way to incorporate the two without offending anyone then more students could then become religiously literate. All it takes is one program in one school distract to make a difference. I believe that not only should private religious schools have a required world religion class, but all schools should. This will teach students from a young age to accept everyone, no matter the religious background. The course could even teach students enough about several religions so they could find themselves through a new religion that may have been portrayed negatively within their community. This is something that could ultimately change our culture. If society learns about the similarities and the differences of all religions starting at a young age, it could decrease the amount of conflict not only the United States but worldwide. People from different religious backgrounds all over the world can come together to support this movement. Let's not limit our children or students to learn about religion through media or only through what is taught in the home. Not all religions are the same, however, they all attempt to answer similar questions about how to live life, communicate with the divine or sacred, and behave in harmony with nature and others. They offer similar principles and tools for living. Our world would be so much better if we focused on

the best the religious traditions have to offer rather than the inaccurate portrayals, as well as

respecting the religious traditions and being open to learn something from them all.

Works Cited

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