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Religion, Culture and Habits: Boundaries Within a Global Village

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You wake up to the sound of your alarm in the dorm of your \$40,000 a year school. You're most tempted to just sleep in—the bed is warm and cozy. Plus, who would notice if you missed another 8 a.m. math class? Maybe you'll just rest a bit longer, then go grab breakfast at the dining hall with some buddies. "Yes," you decide, "that sounds like the best plan" as you hit the snooze button and drift back to sleep.

Thousands of miles away the dawn is breaking, signaling the start of the day for another individual. He is the same age as you, yet climbs out of bed at the first sight of the rising sun. His stomach growls, but he is unable to feed it. Food is scarce, but this is nothing new. Instead of going to a school, which shut down years ago in his small village, he is immediately off to work—whatever he can find for the day. No job is too rough when money is limited. But first, he gets down on his knees and prays to his God, thanking Him for the life he has been given.

These are two drastically different morning routines where the economic, religious, and customary differences are evident. Those features are the three most distinguishing factors that differ from person to person around the world. And, yet, researchers have hypothesized that our world is metaphorically shrinking in size, making the globe a well-connected community. This "global village," as theorized by media scholar Marshall McLuhan in 1964, is still the topic of debate more than 40 years later. (Johnson, *Global Issues* 192). First, it is important to define the word village if we are to better understand McLuhan's theory. After a lengthy discussion in an Honors Expository Writing course at Roger Williams University, many of the students formed the following expanded definition of village: a small community that is closely connected through a common culture, economy, and history. Although this description is arguable, it is reasonable to assume that the group of scholars developed an educated definition, which will serve as a method of analysis to determine if our world could ever truly become a village. A shared economy and history might be an attainable feat—after all, the whole world's history is connected and each economy depends on another. However, the idea of sharing a culture with every individual in the world is not so realistic because of economic, religious, and cultural custom boundaries.

The economic differences between countries are so drastic that it is illogical to consider such divergent nations as able to share a common culture. Take, for instance, the fact that the United States has 50% of the world's wealth with only 6.3% of its population (Shah). How are the other 191 countries and 93.7% of people living? Well, many of them live in an extreme poverty, whereas other economies are more similar to our own. In our modern world, the reality is "prosperity for the few and poverty for the majority" (Shah). It is then that these larger and more economically successful countries act on what they feel is their responsibility by giving aid to the poverty-stricken nations. These two entirely different nations may be bonded by this relationship, but it is certainly not one of equality. When one country has to take on the role of benefactor to another, it forces a hierarchy. With such an uneven relationship, these two considerably different countries

would be unable to share a common culture. The United States, in fact, makes the largest donation to under-developed countries through organizations such as World Food Program (WFP) and United Nation's Children Fund (UNICEF). The WFP, for example, reaches 78 different underprivileged countries, including Afghanistan, Syria, Rwanda, Madagascar, India, and Kenya ("Where We Work"). Assistance comes in all forms—food, medical supplies, soldiers, and even money. It is, after all, an ultimate lack of financial resources that leads to many of the country's problems.

The financial state of a country dictates the number of facilities available to the public, such as schools, post offices, and hospitals. A lack of learning facilities leads to a divide in education and literacy. Although some characteristics may be shared, a young man studying at the expensive Ivy League Yale University is a poor comparison to a young man of the same age struggling to survive in a factory that pays mere cents per hour for intensive labor. It is difficult for individuals at such drastically different economic levels in life to relate. Of course, some may argue that material possessions are not the only way to connect with an individual—we all have feelings, needs, and desires. As far as these material possessions are concerned, it comes down to the difference between necessities and luxuries. When the people of a poverty-stricken village buy food to feed their family, it is a necessity; when the citizens of a rich town use their money to buy a new big screen television, it is a luxury. Perhaps we can connect with individuals on a more emotional level, but the fact remains that our lives and cultures are significantly different, and one reason is economic status.

The economic difference between the United States and Sierra Leone illustrates how dramatically our standards of living can vary and thus why it is difficult to consider the whole world as capable of sharing a single culture or be considered part of the same "village." The GDP, or Gross Domestic Profit, of a region is often looked at when determining the "health of a country's economy" ("GDP"). Simply put, the GDP is the total market value of all goods and services produced within the country ("GDP"). Sierra Leone, a country struggling to regain footing after a tragic civil war, averages a GDP of \$5.022 billion a year, with an estimated \$900 per capita, or person ("Sierra Leone"). Although at first glance that might seem like an impressive number, the figure pales in comparison to the United States' \$12.41 trillion GDP and \$42,000 per capita ("United States"). Of course, a major component of globalization is the technological advancement that our world is experiencing. Not everyone, however, has access to this technology. This "digital divide" (Campbell) as it has been dubbed, is evident when we see poorer individuals unable to access the World Wide Web due to insufficient funds to purchase access. For instance, the number of Sierra Leone's citizens with Internet access adds up to a meager 20,000 ("Sierra Leone"), whereas the United States is home to over 165.71 million Internet users ("United States"). Of course, when looking at statistics, there are always certain factors that should be taken into account. Some might argue that the United States boasts a much larger population than Sierra Leone. It is for this reason, to take into account population discrepancies, that per capita figures are used to illustrate a comparison. Also, a major reason for Sierra Leone's poorer economic situation is that several of the country's industries were weakened due to "civil strife" ("Sierra Leone"). Sierra Leone, as recently as 1997, experienced a "violent military coup" that led the

whole country into chaos and fighting (“Sierra Leone”). This “civil strife” further stands to prove that different cultures will never be able to assimilate since even multiple cultures within a single country undergo a war due to differences.

From the Crusades, to the Holocaust, to the modern day disputes in the Middle East, religious wars have been fought since the beginning of humankind. The clash arises from the simple fact that we all hold different beliefs—different gods, different values, and different practices. Countries have literally been torn apart because of conflict relating back to these differences. Take, for instance, the pilgrims who left England and its church because they disagreed with the church’s practices. This single step toward independence had the tremendous eventual outcome of the creation of the United States, but not before a war was fought and life was lost. Religion is a defining characteristic in many people’s lives and, in several cases, dictates their culture. A well-known example would be the ways in which religion influences a person’s marriage. Different religious sects hold different beliefs regarding the ceremony, the number of spouses, the courting that precedes the marriage, and the vows taken at the ceremony. For instance, Mormons once practiced polygamy, the act of taking multiple wives. This controversial notion was banned in the United States as well as abandoned by most Mormon churches due to federal standards for marriage, and yet it is still illegally practiced by nearly 60,000 believers in the U.S. alone (“Polygamy FAQ”). This example demonstrates several things. First, that although religious views can be changed, there will always be some who refuse to give up what they have been taught is holy. Second, different religious practices defy other religious beliefs. The plural marriages of Mormonism would never be accepted by the Catholic Church’s standards. Third, politics often intrude on religion and vice versa. The United States government took action against polygamy because, despite the First Amendment right to a separation between church and state, this practice directly affected the government through marriage licenses and the tax benefits that result from formal recognition of union. With this one issue being worthy of so much debate, it’s no wonder that chaos is known to ensue when government and religion mix.

If multiple religions cannot peacefully function within a single nation, it is unwise to believe they could ever be joined to form a single culture. It is this same problem, of several religions fighting for superiority in a nation, that so often graces our news channels in the form of the Iraqi conflict. The issue is a complicated one, dating back to the 7th century, “when Muslims split over the issue of who should rightly lead the Islamic community. Those who accepted the rule of Umayyad family became known as the Sunnis. Those who opposed the Umayyads in favor of the descendants of Ali...were known as the Shias” (“Religions an Ethnic Divisions”). This divide led to two combating Islamic sects whose fighting is still evident to this day. Iraq’s Baath Party, a political group mixed with religious Sunni roots, became the ruling party in 1963 (“Religious and Ethnic Divisions”), leading to the suppression of the Shia sect. Then, in 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, ousting the Baath Party and its leader Saddam Hussein from power. Now the United States struggles with the next step in the Iraqi process, with the final goal of setting up a stable government in the country. Tensions are at an all-time high with “Shia looking for revenge for decades of suppression at the hands of Sunnis” and “Sunnis afraid they will suffer suppression at the hands of the Shia” (“Religion and Violence in

Iraq”). This is evidence that government and religion don’t mix well, and yet both are defining characteristics of an individual’s culture. The final outcome is that “today both Sunni and Shia Muslims are at each others’ throats in a civil war that is tearing apart families, neighborhoods, and communities...” (“Religion and Violence in Iraq”). Of course, this is just a single example of religious disagreement. The bottom line is that religious intolerance will keep the globe from adopting one single culture.

Culture envelops our simple everyday habits that differ from country to country, community to community. Some researchers argue that with McDonald’s fast food chains and America’s MTV expansion across the globe, we are sharing a common “culture.” Culture, however, is so much more than what restaurant you eat at or what music you listen to. Our daily routines are full of defining cultural activities. Take, for example, the simple task of communication. What many people don’t realize is that there are a total of 6,912 active languages spoken worldwide (“World Languages”). How can a world that cannot even verbally communicate be considered a village with a common culture? Another problem we face are traditions and customs set by the forbearers of communities. The United States, for instance, celebrates holidays and notices precedents set in place by former presidents. Our forefathers also set into place our democracy and code of laws. These rules would seem foreign, perhaps even absurd, to most people living outside of the United States. For example, Norway functions on a socialist government; Russia operates under a capitalist government; and Cuba is run by communist rule (“Types of Government”). These different types of governing bodies could never coexist under a single culture since there will always be wars fought in opposition of one another’s conflicting views. So it is that our everyday habits—from how we speak, to what rules govern our lives, to the very food we eat—deter us from sharing a common culture and thus forming a global village.

One main cultural custom that differs from country to country is the annual occurrence of holidays. Many of these celebrations are in acknowledgement of a nation’s heroes. For instance, the United States recognizes the birthdays of activist Martin Luther King Jr.; first president George Washington; and “The Great Emancipator”, President Abraham Lincoln. Most people who do not live in America have no concept of who these people are and what they have done for our country. These holidays are a distinct characteristic of the American culture. Other countries also celebrate renowned predecessors. For example, Venezuelans celebrate the birthday of Simon Bolivar. Bolivar’s victories as a South American general led to the independence of Bolivia, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. American scholars have often referred to Bolivar as the “George Washington of South America” (Johnson, “History”). Critics who oppose the view that the world cannot share a culture might point out that there are, indeed, several holidays that are found all around the world, such as Christmas. To counter this argument is the fact that these holidays, too, are part of a culture since the majority of them are religious and, as explained earlier, religious differences are a major obstacle to the sharing of a common culture. Also, although these holidays are recognized worldwide, they are celebrated in manifestly different ways. For instance, the traditions associated with Christmas are so numerous that no two countries have the same customs. In Sweden, as opposed to our own American celebrations, the holiday really begins with the St. Lucia

festival on December 13 (Hovmöller). Celebrations continue and the Christmas tree is put up one or two days before the actual day. It is at this point, too, that all the boys and girls are preparing to welcome their Swedish Santa Claus and Jultomten, the little brownie elf who helps Santa deliver all of the gifts ("Christmas in Sweden"). Each holiday and its celebrations are different throughout the globe and just serve as another boundary that prohibits the world from sharing a mutual culture.

McLuhan's idea of a "global village" theory is idealistic. It assumes that the globe shares a single history, economy, and culture. Whereas a common history and economy are arguably present, a shared culture is less realistic. How can the world be a village when war, poverty, indifference, and ignorance have led to the ruin of so many people? Of course, our world may not share a culture, but this does not lessen the importance of respecting the cultures of others. Ultimately, however, our world's different communities are divided by religious, economic, and cultural customs boundaries.

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