Author: Johnathan Norris

Topic: Religion and Ethics

Abstract

In this video, I give a quick introduction to myself and anthropology. After that, I go into a brief history of “religion” in anthropology, and how it is a difficult term to define. I highlight the previously-held belief that religion, like humans, evolved from magic and then into “secularism.” I note that anthropology has since rejected this evolutionary understanding of religion and no longer separate “magic” from religion. I then give a broad overview of how anthropology has moved from seeing religion as a single system and now prefers to understand local expressions of religion (example: local Islams and local Christianities). I end with a conversation about ethics, which is the new fascination in anthropology. Instead of view people and decision-making as an easy thing (I am a Christian and make Christians decisions), anthropologists now look to the multiple “ethical streams” (family, group, religion, etc.) that people use to make decisions. These “streams” are often in conflict.

Key Terms

Religion: Simply defined in the video as something you believe in, even though you cannot see it.

Ethics: The systems that you use to determine what is “right” and “wrong”

Ethical Streams: The multiple and competing systems of ethics used to determine “right” and “wrong.” (religion, family, gender, etc.)

Ethical Framework: Someone’s (in)coherent system of ethics used in decision-making

Transcript

Hi everyone! This is Johnathan Norris and I am a graduate student at Boston University. I will be presenting today on religion & ethics in anthropology. I know that you all might be familiar with Religion but with Ethics, you might be like “what in the world are ethics?” We'll get into that later so don't worry about that. But yeah, this is a topic that I am very much interested in.

But before we begin, I think it's important that you get to know me a little better. So you can see me up here maybe in the corner. That's also a picture of me in sunglasses with my hair all nice and did in front of actually Pittsburgh Pennsylvania where I did my fieldwork for my master's degree thesis.

But prior to becoming an anthropologist, I actually was a therapist and a religious leader. I would go into people's houses as a therapist and do crisis counseling with them, help them access services in your community. And as a religious leaders, I actually was a pastor to church and when they found out that I was gay they actually cicked me out and threw me out and I lost my license to be a pastor with the whole denomination because of who I was.

And so, being both a therapist and a religious leader, I was very interested in people, their problems, and in helping them sift through it. But then when I got kicked out, I quickly realized how much religion, in particular, was wrapped up in my identity and I had to piece and sift through that and figure out who I was after I left my religion and no longer consider myself religious.

And so going to that process myself and realizing how deep religion was wrapped up in who I was, I become interested i the process: what does that look like for other people when they walk away from religion? When they move from one place to another, how does religion play into that as part of their identity?

Having these questions, I was like "why don't I become an anthropologist so I can ask these questions and do some research to figure it out?"

And so that's what I do now. I am a first-generation college student and so first gen first generation which means that my parents my grandparents do not have a college degree. And so, I was the first in that line of my family to actually go for a bachelor's degree and now I am a PhD student. So, that's just to say that don't' let things stop you just because your family has gone to college there still opportunities and ways to break that ceiling in your own life, because I know I did.

In addition to being a second-year PhD student in anthropology I also help run a citizenship Clinic out of BU where we help Syrian refugees prepare for the citizenship exam and so I do a lot of a translation and teaching between Arabic and English to get them prepared to take the exam to become Citizens.

And, specifically, I study migration and religion. Usually in religion I'm looking at Christianity and Islam religion, but broadly too, in the context of Syrian refugees. I will be doing my fieldwork over in the Middle Eastern in a couple years but that's kind of why I asked those questions in particular. But that's enough about me.

What's anthropology? Anthropology is the study of humans, past, present, and future. We are interested in both societies and cultures and people that have come before us. And in the present day, I study the present day, that's called Cultural Anthropology. We study humans that are alive today and what their.. how they interact, how they understand themselves, how they do what they do, how economy and politics play together.

But we are also interested in the past. We have archeologists that dig up old societies and things that have passed on in time to kind of reconstruct them to understand why and what happened.

We also have biological anthropologists that study apes and our relationship with the great apes and ask more biological questions. You know: why and how do hormones interact and make us do things? That's not me. But if you like that kind of stuff, anthropology has a has a branch as a track for you there too.

But that's just a quick overview. So, getting into religion and anthropology. So religion is hard to define. It is a very very broad term and because it used to mean something that, you know, was seen more in a Christian understanding that you have like this god or this deity that was above you and that was different from Magic, which will get into a second, and how that's different from like being a secular person who doesn't have a religion. And so let's just say I mean for now I think religion for these purposes it's easy just to think of a belief system in something that you can't necessarily see with your eyes. We'll just keep it like that. Religion is when you believe in something that you can't see with your eyes but you know it's still real. We'll call anything that's like that a "religion." That's just an easy thing.

In the past, anthropologists have been interested in rituals and symbols and detailing those specifics. And so if you think of ritual, if you can see the woman on the left, she is giving a food offering to a god, or the Catholic priests on the upper right corner, he is doing the ritual of Mass and so those are just the acts that we do over and over again in a religious setting. We're very interested at one point in that. And the symbols right?

So we have the same picture with the priest, we have cups we have Bibles, a long robe. What do those mean why are those significant and how did those come about? Or in the picture below, we have three Indonesian girls in hijab and hijab is another religious symbol. It symbolizes, it means something. In the past we've been very interested in detailing all the specifics.

But in anthropology we have moved past and moved on from that because that could get a little boring and just kinda mundane. Heck, you might be right now, "Oh my god, this guy is so ridiculous."

Alright, so we've come up with better questions and so now we're really interested in how someone's religion interacts and intersects with other things. How it connects with other things in their culture, like economy or politics and how religion connects to those things. Or how people come to understand themselves in light of their religious experience. So (we look at how religion) impacts identity or what we are going to be talking about today is decision making or how religion impacts the way that humans make decisions. Decisions about politics and economy. Those are the questions we have come to now.

So like like I said, in the past we viewed these as three distinct things: magic to religion to the secularism. We no longer think of it that way. So magic being like a fire dance or a rain dance, which brings down rain and then we originally believed that that evolved into religion and that, you know, put this god-person above us and so we can dance around the fire all we want to, but it's this person above us, this God, who makes determinations, and then we evolved again into "secularism." That's what was thought, that we don't believe any longer in magic or religion.

But how many of you believe in magic or religion? How many of you are religious? How many have a religion? How many of you have been raised in families that are very religious. I would say that's probably a lot of you. The idea that we keep evolving into these stages was originally how it was (seen) but we've totally just thrown out. And we now no longer make a distinction between "magic" and "religion" and even to say that "secularism" isn't a religion in itself is not really... it is still a belief in something that you can't see. In a sense of like these ideas that you can't see. We no longer view these distinctions anymore. But we're really interested in is trying to get to know specifics. So how a religion, think Islam or Christianity, is on "the ground."

And so we no longer view like Islam as this one thing or Christianity as this one thing. But multiple Islams and multiple Christianities. And so what this is called, it's a big word, is "Discursive Tradition," but let's just call it a "Talking Tradition." We now are looking at ways that local groups of people have a certain talking traditions and how they "talk" with their sacred texts, like the Bible or the Quran, or how they talk to their ancestors. They have a specific conversation that is specific to a location that determines what and how they exactly live and what they practice.

So, why is this important? By bringing it down to this level, this specific local level, and looking at how local people have a tradition of conversations with each other and with the past, it allows us to use religion as window to know what conversations are important to a particular group of people. By knowing what conversation are important to someone, we can start understanding how they make decisions and what things they value. And we can use their ideas to critique our assumptions about how and why the world works.

So, that's kinda where religion as (gone to).

And, so, we have the example of the Hijab and women in Islam. I don't know about you but I was raised thinking that the Hijab was oppressive in Islam and oppressed women. That was my "Talking Tradition," that's what my community told me about the Other religion, Islam.

But instead of taking my Talking Tradition and believing what I was told, I listened to another Talking Tradition. And when you listen to Muslim Women, for example, from around the world, you find out that they wear the Hijab for many reasons. And what's interesting is their reasons are specific to their location and their Talking Tradition and their conversations with their families, with the past with, the Quran, with the Hadith (which are all sacred texts and important texts to Islam). And we learn that they wear the Hijab for self-expression, to protect from creepy guys, as a way of protest, or as simply style. So to say that all Muslim women wear the Hijab for this reason is no longer... anthropologists no longer ask those questions. We want specifics. Why do these women in this place wear Hijab? What does it mean to them? And what can this tell us about the broader things happening in the culture?

And that's why I love studying anthropology. It allows me to explore just about anything I want to know about humans and what they do. And by doing that, by asking questions, I get challenged on my own understanding of what is right, based on how I was raised. And religion is just one way to tap into this window. Taking religion and going, "Okay. Islam, Hijab, women. What can that, when you make it specific, what can those things say about this specific culture, this specific time and why they are doing what' they're doing.

But the problem with Talking Tradition is that, you know, human decision-making, even in religious settings, it much more complicated. So it's not, you know, it's wrong to think that, you know, Muslim women wearing hijab or even Christian evangelicals voting for Trump is all just one... it just all comes from a Talking Religious Tradition, (that) it just comes from a religious understanding. No. We have to make things more complicated. And that's where ethics come in.

So, now, anthropologists have almost moved on beyond "religion" and into ethics. Ethics and decision-making. And so we see know what are called "ethical streams," where you have ethics of the family, ethics of the group, ethics of religion, and even ethics of gender. And how we all pull on those different streams to make decisions. And so when you think "ethics" that's what we use to determine what is "right" and "wrong," appropriate and inappropriate, ideal or not ideal. So when we're determining "right" and "wrong," we are talking about ethics. It's just a big word for determining right and wrong.

So, let me give you a scenario. Pretend that on your way to school, you just found a wallet on the sidewalk with $500. There's an ID inside, but you don't recognize the person. What would you do? Would you keep the money or use the ID to find the person, find the man who last his wallet? Okay, I'm going to complicate this a little bit. What if your family is about to be kicked out of your home and that $500 would allow you to stay for another month? Would you keep it then, and give it to your parents? Or would you still find the man who lost the wallet? Let's say you decide to keep it still, to give to your parents. Let's say you get to school and your history teacher says, "Ugh. My brother just called and he lost his wallet today. $500 was inside. I hope he finds it, he really needs it." What would you do then?

So your family ethics says that your family needs money or will be homeless. Your group ethics say that a student of your history... as a student of your history teacher, you are more closely connected to the man and his wallet than you might have thought original, cuz you're now part of the Group. What is your religion saying? What are your religious ethics saying? Maybe you are religious in this could be an act of God. Is God testing you with this situation? How are going to navigate it? Or did God give you the money? Who knows, right?

So, to say that we make decisions based on one thing, anthropologists are like "mmm" there's more going on here. We have family ethics, group ethics, and then we have, like, religious ethics. How do people wrestle with situations like this, like giving $500 back or keeping the $500 we just found? Is it mine? Getting to that decision might not be so easy. We pull on different ethical streams to arrive at a decision to either give that money back, keep it, or give it to our family, you know, to save it. Like, what are you going to do?

And so, that's where anthropologists, being interested in religion, have kinda even moved on to saying there's more. And, okay, some say that people make decisions because of their religion, or that they make religious decisions because of their religion, and there still anthropologists who are exploring that. But many others have moved on and started seeing religion and ethics in this conversation, in particular to understand how people make decisions, why they value things, and to see where society might be headed, or what has made it... like maybe these decisions so hard or challenging.

So why are Religion and Ethics important? Cultural Anthropology cares about why people do what they do and by looking at the world through religion and ethics, this helps to understand decision-making at both the cultural and individual levels. And so, for example, Why do people migrate? Where did ISIS come from? What makes religious groups and individuals turn violent? Why do most Evangelical Christians in America support the GOP, the Republican Party? How does religion influence how migrants and refugees interact with their new or shifting contexts? So, we're interested in all of that.

Think of the knife attack that just happened in France. Why did that person decide to do that? Anthropologist wrestle and are allowed to wrestle with these questions of decision-making and, especially when you think of violent acts, it's easy to say, "Oh, because he's a terrorist!" But it's actually much more complicated to arrive at that decision to do a knife attack or to turn violent, or even to move. Like, some people because they feel called by God to, while others get kicked out of where they are... How do they use religion to reorient their lives and figure out where they are in the world?

That's why I believe, as an anthropologist, religion and ethics are important, because they help us to better understand these decisions--these very hard decisions--and it helps us complicate what it is to be "human," through specific lenses, right? They're specific windows. Anthropologist love to complicate what it means to be human, and one of the ways (we do that) is religion and ethics.

So, by understanding a person's ethical framework, so they're right and wrong, right? So how they're determining right and wrong, that's "ethical framework." By understanding a person's ability, or what they use to determine right and wrong, we can better understand human behavior, tradition, and where things are headed into the future.

And so I know that was a very quick and broad overview, but that is just one window of what anthropologists do, as we look at human behavior and try to figure out why people do what they do in particular cultures. And one way to do that is through religion and reconceiving, re-understanding what "religion" is. And even complicating that. Cause we thought that religion was "this way" in the past, but now we're like, "Well, it's actually even more complicated. Who knew?!"

When you think about your life, how do you arrive at decisions? Why do you make those decisions? What ethical streams do you pull from? Remember our slide back here, and these are questions that you can bring to Anthropology or any other questions you have about why humans do what they do. that's what makes anthropology so interesting, because we are allowed to ask these questions and there's plenty of space to come and join us. So if you find this topic fascinating please reach out to your teacher, we can get you in contact with with people that can help set you up to be a little Anthropologist now and maybe get into a Ph.D program later because we have so many questions that we want to ask about the human race and we need people to do it!

So thanks for listening! I hope you enjoyed this little mini lecture thing and my name is Johnathan Norris, like I said, good luck for the rest of your day the rest of this semester (or 9 Weeks) thanks for listening.