Ethnocentrism, Cultural Relativism and the Amish

My time here at F&M has been spent studying a myriad of different subjects, but there has been a common thread: development and human rights. Almost all of my classes have touched on these subjects in one way or another. My interest in, and study of, human rights has led me to believe that they are universal and should be guaranteed for all people. But I have run into a conundrum. As a western liberal, liberal in the classic sense (not the democrat/republican sense), I believe in the universality of human rights. But, I am also inclined to respect other cultures, even if they do not share my values. So what do I do when a culture that is not my own violates what I believe to be a human right, and excuses the act by claiming a difference in culture? I have grappled with this question extensively and I decided that this paper would be a good platform to explore some of my ideas on the subject.

Two classes in particular here at F&M really helped me frame this question. The first was Anthropology 100. It was in this class that I learned the terms ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. Just in case its been a little while since your last anthropology class, I will give a quick definition of both terms. Ethnocentrism is the idea that ones own culture is superior or somehow more correct than others. Cultural relativism, on the other hand, is the idea that all cultures are essentially equal and it is not for us to judge what others do. I quickly realized during this class
that I was, for the most part, an ethno-centrist and I wasn’t sure if I was comfortable with that. I began to understand that my view of human rights was a western construction and that human rights were not something fundamental or inherent in all of us. I learned by viewing the world through an anthropological lens that cultural relativism was important. Sometimes a practice, when viewed from the outside, looks wrong, but when one understands the culture surrounding that act it begins to make more sense. I realized that while I still believed that humans were entitled to certain rights, it all of a sudden became harder to decide what those rights should be and how they should be applied. My neat line in my head between right and wrong was suddenly much more blurry.

The second class was Intro to Religious Studies where I learned about ritual and its role in religion. In religious communities, shared rituals create bonds of trust and understanding. It is not necessarily the act itself that is important, but the fact that everyone participates in that act, despite any hardships or discomfort it may cause. Ritual can create bonds in all types of communities, not just religious ones. Examples include members of the Jewish community keeping kosher, members of Greek organizations participating in the pledging process or members of this very society writing papers and presenting them to the group. All of us in this room have or will present a paper like this one at some point. The fact that we all know that we have or will go through the difficulty of writing and the nervousness of presenting a paper bonds this society. If the paper were optional, or we did away with it because it was too hard given the other demands in our lives, this society would lose much of its meaning. Community members, when they take part in the same rituals as others
in their community, become members of that community and build trust with one
another. We are all members of communities, whether it is in the form of the F&M
community, sports teams, Greek life, Nationality or religion. In any community, that
any of us identify with, there are certain rituals or shared experiences that make us
feel connected to that group.

Community reliance on ritual, combined with the struggle between
ethnocentrism and cultural relativism creates a difficult position for someone like
myself who is trying to define what human rights should be. What happens when an
act violates what I believe to be a human right, but is an important ritual of a
different culture? Often, as outsiders, we find fault not with an entire culture, but
with certain aspects of that culture. We may believe that if we could only remove or
stop that particular ritual or practice with which we have a problem, then
everything would be ok. But, given how important ritual is to community, how is it
possible to decide what is acceptable and what is not? Could it be that removing
even a single ritual or practice would damage the fabric of a community? And if so, is
it worth it? But, at the same time, must we ignore what we see as injustice for the
sake of not being ethnocentric? To quote Caleb Rosado, “Many ethicists believe that
the concept of cultural relativism threatens the discipline of ethics since, if values
are relative to a given culture then this must mean that there are no universal moral
absolutes by which the behavior of people can be judged. Therefore, “if there is no
observable control transcending all cultures, no eternal book of rules, then right and
wrong are a matter of opinion and it doesn't matter what we do: anything goes!” I, for one, am not willing to live in a world where injustice can be justified simply by claiming a difference in culture.

So, I am stuck at a crossroads. On the one hand I want to be ethnocentric, I stand by my belief in human rights. But, at the same time I realize that communities are built on ritual and the western liberal in me still wants to be understanding of cultural differences.

American philosopher Richard Rorty believes that “we have become so open minded that our brains have fallen out.” A self-described bourgeois liberal, he believes the solution is to all be frank ethno-centrists. What he means by being frank is that we should acknowledge our ethnocentrism and be upfront and honest about it. If we address it openly, and also logically, we are not simply dismissing other cultures, but understanding why we feel the way we do and standing behind our beliefs. He is critical of western liberals who cling to cultural relativism saying: “We would rather die than be ethnocentric, but ethnocentrism is precisely the conviction that one would rather die than share a certain belief.” His theory of frank ethnocentrism “urges liberals to take with full seriousness the fact that the ideals of procedural justice and human equality are parochial, recent, eccentric cultural developments, and then to recognize that this does not mean that they are any less

3 Ibid., 203.
worth fighting for.”

I am inclined to agree with Rorty. We should stand up for our beliefs, but is there no place for cultural relativism? I believe that there is. In an attempt to reconcile ethnocentrism with cultural relativism I look to a community that lives with us right here in Lancaster County. The Amish are a community that many take issue with, but one particular aspect of their culture stands out to me. As an ethnocentrist who does not want to give up entirely on cultural relativism, I see the tradition of rumspringa as a way to reconcile the two. Allow me to explain.

There are many traditions practiced by the Amish that are looked down upon by mainstream American society. In particular “in Amish society there is a clear patriarchy in which gender roles are strictly defined. Amish Women are expected to marry, have children and submit to their husband’s will. There is no divorce. It is the responsibility of the wife to care for the children and the household. Her tasks include cooking, cleaning, sewing, gardening and maintaining the general welfare of the family. Only 3% of Amish women have a job outside of the household.” But, despite any perceived injustices on our part, every member of the Amish community has made the choice to be there. Rumspringa is a time in every Amish youths life, usually starting at 16, when they are encouraged to explore the outside or “English” world. During this time Amish youth can partake in modern technology, go to the mall, interact with other Americans, and in some cases even experiment with drugs and pre-marital sex. For most Amish, rumspringa lasts until between 18 and 22, but

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can go on as long as they want. While they are free to choose whichever life they want, most, close to 90%, return to join the Amish church. Once you have joined the church you are committed for life and if you leave you will be shunned by the community. As I said earlier, community relies on ritual to build cohesion and trust and the Amish community is a perfect example of that. I do not believe that the Amish community would be able to survive if it compromised its traditions. It is essential to that community that every member buys in fully, taking the good with the bad.

Now, I may take issue with certain aspects of the way the Amish live their lives. But I should not ignore the fact that each community member had a free choice in whether or not they wanted to participate. I feel, in this situation, I should be a cultural relativist and accept that community for what it is. If that choice did not exist however, and I still objected morally to their practices, I believe it would be appropriate to be ethnocentric and at the very least disagree with their way of life. So this is where I draw my line in the sand. If people have a free choice in what they are doing we should not object to their practices even if we disagree.

Now I anticipate that some of you will say that rumspringa is not a truly free choice, and question what constitutes a free and fair choice to begin with. The Amish grow up in an insulated community and are told from a very young age what to believe, so how could they make an unbiased choice as to what kind of life they want to live? I agree, Amish youth are certainly influenced by their upbringing, but who amongst us in not? Every single person, no matter what community they grow up in, is influenced by their upbringing. I do not believe that just because we are
influenced by our upbringing we cannot make free, rational choices. Being free to make a choice, in my mind, means that a person is allowed to decide without fear of direct punishment and they have access to the majority of information available.

There is no such thing as a perfectly free choice, our decisions are always colored by our past and the information available. But this is an imperfect world and we cannot expect there to be perfect freedom. But, as a real world example of a community that gives its members a free choice as to whether or not they want to be a part of it I have not found a better one than the Amish.

There are certain practices around the world that have become hot topics of debate, where both ethnocentric and cultural relativist views have been expressed. One such topic that has garnered widespread attention is FGM, or female genital mutilation. Without going into too many unpleasant details, FGM is a surgical procedure performed on the genitals of girls and women in many parts of the world.

The term FGM "covers a range of procedures, which are also referred to as female circumcision and introcision." The practice is mostly observed in Africa, but examples can be found in many places around the world. The World Health Organization states that "FGM has no health benefits, and it harms girls and women in many ways. It involves removing and damaging healthy and normal female genital tissue, and interferes with the natural functions of girls’ and women’s

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bodies.”7 It is widely condemned as a violation of human rights, but there are some who defend the practice based on its cultural importance. “Among communities that practice FGM, the procedure is a highly valued ritual, whose purpose is to mark the transition from childhood to womanhood. In these traditional societies, FGM represents part of the rites of passage or initiation ceremonies intended to impart the skills and information a woman will need to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother... Certain communities carry out FGM for religious reasons, believing that their faith requires it... Other communities consider female genitalia to be ugly, offensive or dirty, and thus the removal of the external genitalia makes a woman more hygienic and aesthetically pleasing. Some subscribe to the notion that FGM enhances a woman's fertility, and the chances of her children’s survival.”8

In the face of an act that is in my eyes so blatantly abhorrent, so blatantly a violation of human rights I want to be ethnocentric and condemn the practice. But some have argued that in our own culture we do many things that are similarly unhealthy or dangerous to conform to social norms. Breast enhancement surgery, vaginal rejuvenation surgery, or a laybiaplasty9 are all procedures that a portion of women in our society feel compelled to undertake to conform to social expectations. These procedures, when looked at objectively, are not drastically different from FGM. They both cut sexual organs for non-medical reasons. Nor are they done for

entirely different reasons, both are done to make women more “attractive” or “acceptable” to men. My gut reaction is that they are different things, but when trying to look at them objectively the differences get smaller. Both cultures foster terrible practices, so how can we make the distinction? This is where my idea of free choice comes in. In America we are not forced to undertake such procedures, and those who do have access to all the information, even if they choose not to take advantage of it. Young women in Africa, however, often have no choice, free or otherwise, and to me this is unacceptable.

As a western liberal my ideals are shaped by my culture and upbringing. They are biased and not universal, but as Rorty said, that does not make them any less worth fighting for. When people have a choice that is essentially free and fair, they should live how they wish, with no interference from us or anyone else (assuming they are not directly harming others by their choice of lifestyle). On the other hand, when rights that I or other western liberals hold to be fundamental are violated, we should stand up for our beliefs and not allow for our tendency toward cultural relativism to soften our stance. The case of the Amish is a real world example of a community that engages, in my opinion, in some questionable practices. At the same time, however, they are a great real world example of giving people a choice in how they wish to live their lives. This example does not help with every situation involving a difference in culture, but it can serve as a benchmark for those of us who wish to maintain our core convictions while not infringing on other cultures.
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