

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

SUMMARY: Encountering traditions that you might not agree with and determining respectful engagement in such situations.

CASE TYPE: Ethical

Ethical cases involve value tradeoffs no matter the decision. They involve weighing competing values. For these, there is often no clear ‘right’ answer.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodations • Agency and Adaptations • Cultural Humility 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practice cultural humility and engage respectfully with unfamiliar religious or cultural norms. 2. Explore the tension between individual autonomy and community expectations. 3. Reflect on how hospitality and mutual respect function in immersive settings. 4. Consider the broader implications of pluralism and justice in cross-cultural experiences.

SCENARIO

Estela, Manny, and Jacob are all rising juniors in the same pre-med program at their university. During the summer after their sophomore year, they take part in a program that places pre-med students at community medical clinics for an eight week immersive experience. They have been placed at a small clinic serving an under resourced area of the city. The clinic is run by an order of Catholic religious sisters, and Estela, Manny, and Jacob are living in the guest rooms at their convent. Arriving on a Monday, after a short orientation, they dive right into clinical work the next day. The first week flies by, and all three students are incredibly grateful to have an opportunity to get some hands-on medical experience. That Saturday, one of the sisters informs them that, as part of their community religious observances, Sundays are observed as a strict day of rest. Estela, Manny, and Jacob are asked to refrain from chores and music each Sunday. This expectation was not communicated in advance. Later that night, the students are discussing this new development. Estela jumps in, “I’m not even christian, but if that’s what they expect of us, we need to do it. They’re our hosts, and we should respect their requests.” Manny interjects, “Well I’m Catholic and this is a lot more strict than normal practice. I get that it’s their interpretation here, but that’s just for their community. We’re just living here, I don’t think we need to live by all their community practices and expectations.” Jacob agrees with Manny, saying, “I think we should say something to the sisters. I want to be respectful, but Sunday is our only day to ourselves, and I don’t want to be so limited.” Estela strongly disagrees that they should say anything. They are unsure whether to adjust their behavior or express dissent.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What values and assumptions might be motivating the host community’s request?
2. What responsibilities do guests have when entering a community with different norms?

3. How can curiosity rather than assumption shape your response? What questions might be helpful to ask the hosts?
4. How might you respectfully navigate cultural and religious practices different from your own? What does it look like to “listen first” in this situation? How might you start the dialogue process here?
5. What’s the line between accommodation and personal boundaries? When is it appropriate to adapt, and when might it be okay to decline?
6. How might a student articulate a boundary while still showing respect?
7. Is discomfort always a sign that something is wrong—or can it be a space for growth?
8. How do local community members approach differences in belief or practice?
9. How does this situation relate to broader questions of justice and pluralism?
10. How can we uphold both respect and honesty in cross-cultural or interfaith spaces?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **NORMALIZE DISCOMFORT.** Acknowledge that cultural/community tension is a natural part of immersive learning.
- **AVOID OVERSIMPLIFICATION.** Make space for both respectful adaptation and thoughtful dissent.
- **BALANCE PERSPECTIVES.** Ensure students from majority and minority faith traditions or no faith are heard without being put on the spot to represent entire groups.
- **ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE.** Provide guidance and encouragement around respectful and open dialogue as a way to increase understanding.
- **RESPECT DEEPLY HELD BELIEFS.** Ensure that students feel comfortable in their own belief and in the self-confidence to live their values, even while moving through cultural tension and dialogue.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What’s one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- What might you do differently the next time you encounter a community norm that feels foreign or hard to follow?
- Can multiple belief systems coexist in a way that honors difference?