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Ethics and Culture

by [Steven Reece](#) - Wednesday, November 7, 2012, 11:41 AM

According to the Johnson (2012) text, culture can be defined as "the total way of life of a people, composed of their learned and shared behavior patterns, values, norms, and material objects" (p. 283). Based on this understanding then we could say that ethical decisions are culturally based; however, there are some universally held moral values. Otherwise we would be living in a world driven by "ethical relativism" (p. 392) in which universal values or moral standards are absent, relative or subjective to the given culture. This is critically important as Johnson points out because "without shared standards, there is little hope that the peoples of the world can work together to address global problems" (p. 392).

In my personal experience I have lived and worked cross-culturally for 12 years among three distinct cultures: Polish Catholic, Polish Jew and Albanian Muslim. In Poland, I did not work as an English speaker, but I learned to speak Polish and to think and speak as much as I could, as a Pole. It was impossible for me to become Polish, but, as I have shared previously, I became an accepted outsider. I was called a hybrid, a blending of two worlds. As such, I saw things from a Polish and American ethical perspective.

When facing difficult ethical decisions, I looked for the common ground of universal values. In dealing with brothers and sisters in Christ, the matter was somewhat easier than with the Polish population as a whole. Corruption and xenophobia are common in Poland. I had to learn how to interact with both. Corruption was somewhat more difficult for me because often there were subtexts involved meaning Poles knew what to do or how to handle themselves, but I did not always recognize the subtext of the situation and know how to handle the situation.

Once I mastered the language and learned more about the culture, I did well. Bribery was a common part of the Polish culture prior to the collapse of communism; however, the practice of bribery is fading away to some degree. Nevertheless, it was commonly an acceptable practice in some circles. I was stopped on several occasions by police officers for various traffic violations. Frequently, officers would say, "This is a large fine. How can we make it go away, so that you, sir, will not have any points on your driver's license?"

Tempting proposition isn't? I learned a "mantra" that went something like this: "Please give me the ticket and I will pay." I held this position until they either gave me the ticket or released me. On one occasion I was leading a caravan of two cars on a private road that everyone used for a short-cut. I know. I should not have been using the road, but it was 10 miles out of the way to another route to cross the river. The driver behind me, who was an American volunteer and who spoke no Polish, was stopped by a police officer. I turned around and went back.

I approached the officer and asked what the problem was. He told me what I already knew that this was a private road and that he was going to issue a ticket. I told the officer to give the ticket to me. He thought about a second and said, "Fine. Come with me to my car." I did and when I entered the car, he began to tell me how difficult the situation was and how much the ticket would be. Basically he told me, "How can we make this go away?"

I explained to him that I would pay the fine. Please give me the ticket. He made another offer that was very tempting to me because I was in a hurry. He knew by this point who I was as an American residing in Poland. I told him that I was a pastor working with the Baptist Union of Poland. I told him that I broke the law and that I will pay the fine. I emphasized that if I broke the law, I must be honest before the government of Poland and pay the fine. I felt very dirty during this exchange but after I said what I said he told me that his brother was a priest.

His conscious kicked in and he asked me, "What do Baptists say when they say goodbye to each other?" He added, "Catholics say to each other, 'the happiness of God.'" I said to him that we say, "Go with God." He said to me softly, "Go with God." I thanked him and got out of the car.

Universal values such as honesty and integrity are recognized as such, if expressed. The problem, however, is that we may not be consistently living these values for whatever reason.

I believe that Johnson well highlights and gives principles to guide our ethical decision making cross-culturally. I appreciated the explanation of the Eight Global values and the Global Business Standard Codes on pp. 394 and 395. I plan to include the latter in the ethical code of conduct for The Matzevah Foundation.

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