AWARENESS

What is religious diversity?
Religious diversity is the fact that there are significant differences in religious belief and practice. Religion plays an important role in many people’s lives. It can inform our worldview, be intertwined with culture and identity, and can influence the choices we make.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

1. Different religious traditions approach human-animal relationships and the nature of animal life in very different ways.

2. The goal is not to force people to change their beliefs but to find a solution that fits within their beliefs.

3. Give clients the option to share their religious or spiritual beliefs that are relevant to patient care on intake forms.

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients and community.

1. Add a question to intake forms, such as, “Is there any information you would like to share about your religious or spiritual beliefs that will enable us to provide better care for your pet?”

2. Incorporate consideration of dietary practices and observation of various religious holidays into workplace activity planning and scheduling.

3. Learn about the different religions in your community, and pay attention to the beliefs about animals and the human-animal relationship.

4. If you have a friendly relationship with someone from a different faith, ask them about their religion’s views on death, euthanasia, and the cremation of animals.

5. Consider offering support to clients and colleagues in non-religious ways.
TOPIC ESSAY

Understanding religious diversity

Religious diversity has been defined as “the fact that there are significant differences in religious belief and practice” (Tuggy). Religion has an important role in the lives of many Americans. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, three out of four Americans identify with a specific religious faith, 49% say their religion is very important in their lives, and an additional 27% say their religion is somewhat important in their lives (Jones, 2021). Religion informs our world view and is intertwined with culture and identity (Nakai, 2016).

Gallup poll data collected in 1971 and 2021 show that the religious and spiritual beliefs of Americans are becoming increasingly diverse. In 1971, they reported that 90% of Americans surveyed identified as Christian, 6% identified as members of a non-Christian religion, and 4% indicated no religious affiliation (Jones, 2021). Maintaining an open mind is essential when practicing your faith alongside those who may not share your beliefs. The 2021 survey revealed a decline in the number of respondents identifying as Christian to 69% and an increase in those with no religious affiliation to 21%. Non-Christian religious affiliations reported included 2% Jewish and 1% each Muslim and Buddhist (Jones, 2021). Members of the predominant religious affiliation are used to work, school, and business schedules conforming with their religious holidays, and practices that are the standard operating procedures in healthcare are usually consistent with their religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and values. Why do the changing demographics matter to veterinarians?

Dr. Jonathan Ebel, a University of Illinois professor of religion, explains that “situations common to veterinary medicine involve religious beliefs and/or moral frameworks. Most religions have voices within them that connect love for animals to love for the divine, or for ultimate reality. Most religions contain teachings about the ethics of animal care, for example. Religious traditions teach different things about animals; in some faiths, animals are possible manifestations of the divine or they may be considered sacred or with status equal to humans, while in other faith traditions, animals are considered inferior to humans and their importance is primarily as a source of food or labor. Doctrines and practices of care also vary across religious traditions” (J. Ebel, personal communication, 2021).

A common situation that may involve working across differences in religious and spiritual beliefs is end-of-life care for a pet. Consider the following example:

You have been providing palliative care for “Leo,” your client’s Golden Retriever. Leo has been diagnosed with metastatic osteosarcoma of the mandible. Leo’s quality of life has deteriorated substantially over the past couple of months. You and your staff believe that it is time to euthanize Leo. Leo’s owners have indicated that euthanasia is not consistent with their spiritual beliefs. How might you ask questions about your client’s religious/spiritual needs? What do you think might be some of the religious/spiritual concerns about
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Maintaining an open mind is essential when practicing your faith alongside those who may not share your beliefs. Why do the changing demographics matter to veterinarians? Dr. Jonathan Ebel, a University of Illinois professor of religion, explains that "situations common to veterinary medicine involve religious beliefs and/or moral frameworks. Most religions have voices within them that connect love for animals to love for the divine, or for ultimate reality. Most religions contain teachings about the ethics of animal care, for example. Religious faiths, animals are possible manifestations of the divine considered inferior to humans and their importance is primarily as a source of food or labor. Doctrines and practices of care also vary across religious traditions" (J. Ebel, personal communication, 2021).

"So, what are some steps you can take to create a practice that is inclusive of religious diversity?"

1. Develop an awareness of the religious diversity in the community in which you practice.
2. Understand how your personal religious and spiritual beliefs and values impact your interactions with animals.
3. Learn to ask clients about their religious/spiritual needs related to the care of their animals around topics such as euthanasia, palliative care, and death rituals (treating the body with respect).
4. Incorporate consideration of dietary practices and observation of various religious holidays into workplace activity planning and scheduling.

Different religious traditions approach animal-human relationships in very different ways. Recognizing these differences and taking them into account when developing a plan of care will foster improved client relationships,
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I am a veterinarian and epidemiologist who has worked in diversity, equity, and inclusion for more than 30 years. Recently I have collaborated with a multidisciplinary team to develop educational content for DVM students that explores issues at the intersection between religion, spirituality, and veterinary medicine. We address perspectives on euthanasia, population control, immunization, ownership, animal welfare, the role of animals in society, and accommodating religious and spiritual diversity in the workplace.

References


RESOURCES


Grandin, T. Improving religious slaughter practices in the U.S. Anthropology of Food, 5. https://doi.org/10.4000/aof.93


Videos


The inclusion of resources by this author does not imply or constitute an endorsement by the American Veterinary Medical Association or the Veterinary Medical Association Executives.