

UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

TOPIC OVERVIEW

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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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euthanasia or palliative care? How could religious beliefs influence rituals around death, dying, and the dead? How would you find the information you need?

Decisions about euthanasia, palliative care, and respectful handling of the body after death are often influenced by religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Effective communication with your client early in the case management will give you insight into the client's perspective and facilitate development of a care plan that is sensitive to the needs of the client and welfare of the patient.

Awareness of religious diversity will help create a more inclusive environment in your practice and in your community in general. For example, imagine you are planning a team potluck at your practice. One of the clinicians asks that you do a blessing before the meal. Another colleague bristles at the idea. How might you navigate this conflict and have an enjoyable potluck? What do you know about religious dietary needs? (And how could you learn more?) How do you consider the religious and spiritual diversity of your community? How might you encourage respect for different ethical and religious practices? Consider alternative ways to create a sense of unity and gratitude during the potluck that do not involve a religious blessing, such as a moment of reflection, or a non-religious blessing that focuses on general values such as unity, teamwork, and appreciation for a shared meal.

An awareness of these differences by veterinary practitioners will facilitate improved communication with co-workers, clients, and community members, which is good for business and overall well-being. Understanding and embracing the religious diversity of the community in which you practice will provide opportunities for life-long learning and personal growth. Enhanced cross-cultural understanding results in enhanced communication. It makes good business sense to understand the needs and motivations of your clients better. Creating a workplace that is inclusive of religious diversity will help attract and retain a workforce that is reflective of the community in which you practice. It will foster diversity of thought and perspectives that will increase creativity and problem-solving capacity. It will enhance workplace climate and staff well-being. It enhances customer service to clients from diverse backgrounds. Communities that embrace religious diversity communicate better across those differences and have an increased awareness of shared values. This strengthens communities and provides common ground for problem-solving, cooperation, and collaboration.

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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enhance owner compliance, and improve treatment outcomes for animals. In addition, a more direct and informed approach to religious diversity in interacting with colleagues will enhance the workplace climate, resulting in increased job satisfaction, reduced employee turnover, and improved overall well-being for both personnel and clientele. ■

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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.

RESOURCES

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