**CULTURAL RELATIVISM**

**Cultural relativism** is the view that all beliefs, customs, and ethics are relative to the individual within her own social context. In other words, “right” and “wrong” are culture-specific. What is considered moral in one society may be considered immoral in another, and, since no universal standard of morality exists, no one has the right to judge another society’s customs.

Cultural relativism is widely accepted in the social science of anthropology. Cultural relativists believe that all cultures are worthy in their own right and are of equal value. Diversity of cultures, even those with conflicting moral beliefs, is not to be considered in terms of right and wrong or good and bad. Cultural relativists consider all cultures to be **equally legitimate** expressions of human existence, to be studied from a purely **neutral** perspective.

Cultural relativism is closely related to ethical relativism, which views truth as variable and not absolute. What constitutes right and wrong is determined solely by the individual or by society. Since truth is not objective, there can be no objective standard which applies to all cultures. *No one can say if someone else is right or wrong; it is a matter of personal opinion, and no society can pass judgment on another society.*

Cultural relativism sees nothing inherently wrong (and nothing inherently good) with any cultural expression. So, the ancient Mayan practices of self-mutilation and human sacrifice are neither good nor bad; they are simply cultural distinctives, akin to the ‘American’ custom of shooting fireworks on the Fourth of July. Human sacrifice and fireworks—both are simply different products of separate socialization. In January 2002, when President Bush referred to terrorist nations as an “axis of evil,” cultural relativists were mortified. That any society would call another society “evil” is repugnant to the relativist.

**Consider:**

* What are the positive aspects of cultural relativism as a way to view different religious traditions?
* Is cultural relativism achievable for individuals who self identify as religious?