

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

At the core of a religious belief system is worldview. A religious belief system champions a particular way of seeing reality; worldview is that way of seeing. Religious beliefs thus play a significant role in the shaping of one's view of reality and consequently one's view of the environment and one's relation to that environment. Further, one's behavior towards environment is shaped by the beliefs one holds about it. The relationship between belief and behavior is reciprocal. Behavior, in turn, can shape belief. This article discusses the impact of human religious belief on human behavior, specifically behavior toward the natural environment. To demonstrate this, several examples will be used from the religions of North American Indian groups.

1. Introduction: Culture, Religious Belief, and Worldview

If one surveys human societies cross-culturally, it is apparent that religion is universal. It can be found in all societies, although not every human in every society would identify himself or herself as believing in a religion. Early evidence of this human characteristic, religion, is found in the living sites of *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, approximately one hundred thousand years ago. While no writing, of course, exists to reveal to modern peoples the exact beliefs of these early humans, their behavior has left a clue. Some of them at least buried their dead. Archaeological sites like Kebara Cave in Israel and Shanidar Cave in Iraq contain clear evidence of burials. The dead were placed

in pits dug into the ground. In the Shanidar site, pollen analysis of the soil around the skeletal remains indicates that flowers were placed below the body and in a wreath about the head. The flowers were varieties used in historic times for their medicinal properties. While one cannot know with exactitude the purpose of these burials, the most plausible explanation is a belief in an afterlife, a belief in some continued identity for the individual after death. This indicates religion.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between religious belief and human development of natural resources. This relationship differs across human societies. From an anthropological perspective, religion is one of the components of culture. The fundamental task in anthropology is to understand why humans behave as they do, what in their behavior is pan-human and therefore natural to the species, what in their behavior is unique to a specific group, and how human practices worldwide can be explained. The construct “culture” developed as a means of identifying the set of behaviors unique to each human group and distinguishing it from the behavior of others. In anthropology, definitions of culture are legion. An early and famous definition of culture comes from one of the first professional anthropologists, E. B. Tylor, who defined culture in a way that includes all human experience. “Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Today many anthropologists are generally accepting of definitions of culture as a shared way of life which includes values, beliefs, and norms transmitted through the generations within a society. It is this author’s preference to use the following definition: culture is as an integrated system of shared ideas, behaviors, and artifacts characteristic of a society. This definition emphasizes not only the beliefs, values, and norms that are culture, but also behavior and material artifacts. This emphasis on behavior and material output is useful in underscoring the relationship between human *beliefs* about religion and human *actions* regarding development of natural resources, which is the subject of this article. Religious beliefs are in this article viewed as part of culture, some of the shared ideas of a society. Before leaving this discussion of the definition of culture, it might be useful to point out that a society may contain many cultures. The United States, for example, includes numerous cultural groupings.

Definitions of religion are even more contested than definitions of culture. The works of numerous theologians and philosophers as well as anthropologists attest to the difficulty of defining religion. The variety of expressions of religion around the world are difficult to capture in a single definition. Among anthropologists, an early definition was Tylor’s definition of religion as “belief in spiritual beings.” A popular late-twentieth-century definition is that of Geertz who wrote that religion is a “system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” In this article, a definition more like Tylor’s than Geertz’s is preferred in order to make a clear distinction between religion and science. Science also is a symbol system and a belief system and could be defined as religion under Geertz’s definition. As Harris has commented, “the basis of all that is distinctly religious in human thought is the belief in...extraordinary, extracorporeal and mostly invisible beings.” For the purpose of this article, the following definition will be used: religion is a set of beliefs and practices

pertaining to supernatural beings or forces. While this may seem to be a simple definition, it gets at the heart of what separates religions from other belief systems. Using this definition, however, one is immediately in trouble. It does not encompass all belief systems that are usually considered to be religion. For example, many practitioners of Buddhism would contend that Buddhism does not include belief in supernatural forces and thus would fall outside of this definition. Noting the limitation of this definition, it will nevertheless have to do and Buddhism will be considered as an exception to the definition.

One of the characteristics of humans is that they view their own culturally sanctioned behaviors as “natural,” rather than “cultural.” There is a tendency of humans to be ethnocentric and view other cultural ways as bizarre, unnatural behavior while one’s own cultural ways are the natural way for humans to behave. When considering religion, it is common for humans to see at least some of the religious practices of others as superstitious while one’s own religious practices are, well, religious. Again, in this article, all such practices that pertain to the definition given above are religious.

At the core of a religious belief system is worldview. In the definition of culture given above, worldview is part of the cultural beliefs. In anthropological terms, worldview is the descriptions and analyses of the ways in which different peoples think about themselves, about their environments, space, time, and other related concepts. It is a cultural group’s beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality. A religious belief system champions a particular way of seeing reality; worldview is that way of seeing. While some anthropologists might distinguish this from cosmology, in this article, cosmology is seen as a part of worldview and cosmology is the beliefs and assumptions regarding how humans are connected to the universe. It is cosmology when humans provide an explanation for the origin of humans, animals, plants, and the rest of the universe. Cross-culturally religious beliefs typically include worldview and cosmology. Religion thus plays a significant role in the shaping of one’s view of reality and consequently one’s view of the environment and one’s relation to that environment. Further, one’s behavior towards environment is shaped by the beliefs one holds about it. The relationship between belief and behavior is reciprocal. Behavior, in turn, can shape belief. This article looks at the impact of human religious belief on human behavior, specifically behavior toward the natural environment. To demonstrate this, several examples will be used drawing from the religions of Native American Indian groups.

2. Examples of Religious Belief and Worldview: Three North American Indian Tribes

2.1 The Wintu

The Wintu live in the greater Sacramento Valley in the northern portion of what is now the state of California in the United States. Prior to the arrival of Euro-Americans, the Wintu led a full life utilizing an environment rich in natural food resources. Among the animals they hunted were deer, bear, rabbit, and birds. Among the fish they caught were salmon and steelhead. Among the plant foods they gathered were nuts like acorns, berries, tubers, greens like spinach and clover, tiger lily bulbs, wild onions, and wild grapes. During the spring and summer they traveled, settling in five or six different

camps to collect nature's bounty. In the winter they lived in a winter village of bark houses eating the stores of food they had collected during the warm months. Winter villages were composed of from four to several dozen houses and from twenty to two hundred residents.

To understand Wintu perceptions of and attitudes toward the natural environment, one must first understand Wintu concept of self. Among most English-speaking, Euro-American citizens of the United States, reality is separated into two mutually exclusive categories which one might call Self and Other. The Self is associated with waking consciousness and is distinct, separate from the Other, the outside world. In contrast, the Wintu concept of Self is unbounded and continuous so that it merges into or is a part of the Other. Additionally, the Self is associated with states of mind other than waking consciousness. Wintu experience visions and other reality states which are outside of the waking conscious world of the Euro-American, English-speaking citizens. Wintu language shows that the Self, "I," is not the central point of reference. While in English one would say "I go," the Wintu would say "harada," which translates to "I go" or "We go." Whether it is the single self who is "going" or a group, is not distinguished. Thus the individual is not distinguished or separate from the group. A group is not a collection of individuals in which the individual is the unit of recognition; instead, the group is the unit of recognition. The English-speaking, Euro-American self is concerned with reacting to the Other. In English syntax, one might say "I hit the ball." English is a subject-verb-object construction assuming a linear causality. The distinct Self can act on and control the Other. For the Wintu, with a concept of Self that merges into what an English speaking Anglo would see as the "non-Self" or the Other, the Wintu attitude toward the Other is one of balancing the many interrelationships within Self/Other. Since it is not seen as separate, the possibility of the Self controlling the Other does not arise. Instead, actions that benefit the Self/Other are paramount. The Self cannot be benefited unless the Other benefits as well. Included in this Self/Other is nature. Thus the Self cannot be benefited unless the natural world benefits as well.

The Wintu also foreground the generic rather than the particular, while English-speaking, Euro-American United States citizens foreground the particular rather than the generic. For example, when confronted by a deer, the Euro-American perceives first a single, unique, distinct animal which secondarily she knows belongs to the class known as Deer. The Wintu, confronted with a deer, perceives first the embodiment of Deer, the class of animals which exists in sacred time, and secondarily sees the individual animal. This is again a blurring of the individual and the community or a foregrounding of community rather than individual.

In the Wintu language, there is a classificatory distinction between animals, plants and other things, but there is no distinction between living and nonliving. Translating this into concepts found in Euro-American English is difficult, but at its simplest level, it translates as an understanding that all things are living. There is no "nonliving" category. An elderly Wintu woman expresses this conceptualization in the quote below:

...the white people never cared for land or deer or bear. When we Indians kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots, we make little holes...We don't chop down the trees. We only use dead wood. But the white people plow up the ground, pull up the trees, kill everything...The spirit of the land hates them. They blast out trees and stir it up to its depth. They saw up the trees. That hurts them. The Indians never hurt anything...

The Wintu natural world is not divided by arbitrary boundaries like highways or boundaries between political units drawn on survey charts. Instead, to quote from Kroeber, "The (Wintu) Indian knew the land with the soles of his feet; he thought of it in terms of its actual surface." Indicative of this intimacy with the environment, a Wintu individual was able to list some thirty place names along a stretch of the McCloud River only some two miles in length. Many of these place names were associated with the sacred narratives of the Wintu or with the entities in these narratives. The places themselves were seen as radiating sacred power.

Thus Wintu ideas about nature and behavior toward nature are different from English-speaking, Euro-American citizens of the United States. Any culture's worldview is a perception of reality, not an accurate reproduction of reality. It is normal for humans, however, to assume their cultural worldview is the correct one and that it represents reality accurately. For the Wintu, the world is a place where all nature is living and where the Self is understood only as part of that community that is nature. For the Euro-American English-speaker, the Self is a distinct entity separated from the Other. Humans are separate from nature and further, humans assume an active relationship with nature which includes control of nature. Their regard for nature is anthropocentric, focused on looking to see how nature can be used to benefit humans. This perspective is not possible for the Wintu who do not see themselves as separate from nature. What they do to nature, they do to themselves.

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Biographical Sketch

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