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ARE ANIMISTS MODEL ENVIRONMENTALISTS?

by Dan Story

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SYNOPSIS

From the earliest days of the modern environmental movement, American environmentalists have claimed that tribal societies are more ecologically sensitive than cultures embracing Christianity. They claim, moreover, that their intuitive environmentalism flows directly from their religious beliefs and practices. Animism is the religion of all tribal cultures worldwide.

The fact is, tribal people have rarely been model environmentalists and have often exploited nature. Nor does animism include doctrines that directly promote environmental ethics and stewardship. Although indigenous people throughout the world often express a deep respect and reverence for their natural surroundings, it is without a theological framework. Rather, what appears to be nature-honoring rituals and practices are actually attempts to manipulate and appease a hostile spirit world that permeates nature. The goal is not to protect or revere nature, but rather to seek the comfort, health, and safety of the tribe. Christianity, on the other hand, possesses the theological framework necessary for formulating environmental ethics and providing guidance in environmental stewardship.

Animists' answers to life's fundamental questions are shrouded in fear and ignorance. The only reliable answers must flow from an understanding of the true nature of God and victory over the demonic spiritual world.

Geologists identified the cause of the disastrous 7.0 magnitude earthquake that pulverized Haiti, on January 12, 2010, as a shifting fault located miles below the surface of the earth. Popular performer and voodoo priest Erol Josue', however, thinks there was more to the quake than just a natural disaster. According to Elizabeth McAlister, voodoo expert at Wesleyan University and a friend of Josue', the voodoo priest also believed the earthquake "was mother nature, the land of Haiti, rising up to defend herself against the erosion, deforestation, and environmental devastation that have been ongoing for the last few decades."¹

Voodooism in Haiti blends elements of Roman Catholicism with African tribal religions, which were brought into the country by slaves. Like all animists, voodooists believe that spirits exist to "help govern humanity and the natural world" and should be honored and respected. When a voodooist cuts a tree, explained McAlister, "you are supposed to ask the tree first, and leave a small payment for the spirit of the tree."²

This apparent reverence for nature, characteristic of all tribal societies, was a factor that prompted my wife and me to become enthusiastic supporters of American Indian Movement (AIM) that began in 1968. We read books on Native American cultures and traveled extensively throughout the Navajo, Hopi, and other reservations, visiting places now off limits to the public. To show our support for AIM's goal of economic independence, autonomy, and the restoration of "illegally" seized lands, we placed a large bumper sticker on our 1973 Volkswagen camper that had a drawing of an Indian head nickel followed by the words: "The only Indian America ever loved."

Like many young people caught up in the environmental and “back-to-the-land” movements in the 1970s, my wife and I believed that Native Americans were intuitively environmentalists. We also assumed—as did many environmentalists—that the alleged ecologically sensitive relationship with nature embraced by Native Americans and other indigenous people was a direct result of their religious beliefs and practices.

But is this true? And if so, is this a theological teaching or an unrelated side effect? I believe it’s the latter, and I’ll demonstrate in this article that any apparent ecological dimension present in tribal religions is actually merely a byproduct and not doctrine. Not only have tribal religions failed to restrain environmental degradation within their own cultures, but also they have no explicit theological teachings that people should protect and care for nature for nature’s sake.

TRIBAL SOCIETIES

There is a reason why Native American and other preliterate tribal societies throughout the world appear to have been more environmentally friendly than Western societies. For thousands of years, their way of life was closely tied to the land, and survival depended entirely on a successful relationship with the natural world. Unfortunately, however, this did not play out in effective conservation efforts among tribal societies. Few tribes lived in continuous harmony with nature, innocent of environmental abuse. Two examples illustrate this.

Native Americans (and other tribal cultures) often used fire to manipulate the environment for their own interests. This practice was widespread across the continent, and on the Great Plains fires could be a hundred miles across. Fires were used to drive and encircle animals so that they could be more easily killed; to create forage for animals the Indians depended on for food (or alternatively, to ruin forage and force animals into areas where they were more easily hunted); to improve pasture for horse herds; to clear land for crops; and even to “confuse, hinder, maim, or kill their enemies, Indian or white, to drive them from or into cover, or to mask their own actions.”³

Archaeologists have also documented that Indian tribes in North America sometimes engaged in massive overkill by stampeding entire bison herds over cliffs, slaying considerably more than the tribes could possibly use. Nor did Indians always use every portion of the kill, as often alleged. Frequently, just the best part of the meat was taken (the tongues and humps) and the rest was left to rot. Artist and anthropologist George Catlin, who lived several years among Native Americans in the early nineteenth century, reported an instance where 1,400 bison were slaughtered by Sioux Indians solely for their tongues: “From all that I could learn, not a skin or a pound of meat (except the tongues) was brought in [to trade at the fort].”⁴

In recent times, Native Americans have willingly accepted the negative consequences of modern technology in order to promote economic development. On the Navajo and Hopi reservations, strip mining and power plants provide jobs, but at the expense of pollution and “deeply scarred, stripped lands [that] will take centuries to recover.” Other tribes have shown an interest in reservations hosting waste-disposal sites, including radioactive waste.⁵

This is not said to disparage Native Americans or to deny the fact that indigenous people throughout the world, regardless of whether they were motivated by survival necessities or love for nature, typically embraced a deep respect for their natural surroundings. Many tribal people today express a great desire to protect the land. The question at hand is not whether tribal people exhibited a reverential and ecological sensitivity to nature, but whether those sentiments were an explicit teaching in their religious beliefs. Answering this question requires that we examine the religious beliefs of tribal societies before the influence of Christianity and Western culture.

ANIMISM

In the mid-nineteenth century, the new science of anthropology increased American and European contact with preliterate societies. Most of these scientists agreed that an enormous gulf existed between

civilized man and the “savage” —and that the former was far superior to the latter in every way. Charles Darwin visited the coast of Tierra del Fuego and spent several months among some of the most “impoverished people on earth.” Nothing in their way of life appealed to him. Darwin wrote in his journal: “These poor wretches were stunted in their growth, their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant, their gestures violent....I could not have believed how wide was the difference between savage and civilized man: it is greater than between a wild and domesticated animal, inasmuch as in man there is greater power of improvement.”⁶

The assumption that before contact with Christianity, tribal people lived in an idyllic relationship with their physical and spiritual surroundings is a fairly recent and largely mythical notion. It has only been since the last century that Darwin’s demeaning view was replaced by the “noble savage” image. The truth, however, is far different from this popular sentiment. The fact is, before Christian missionaries liberated many of them, tribal cultures were in bondage to religious beliefs that were embedded in a deep-seated fear of the spiritual world—and even their physical environments. The world of preliterate societies was not friendly and innocent; it was hostile, threatening, and had to be constantly appeased. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, most preliterate societies have either disappeared or have been radically altered by foreign cultures. Today, probably only 6.5 to 7.5 percent of the world’s population still lives in a “primitive” state.⁷ Nevertheless, tribal cultures exist in Asia, Australia, New Guinea, Indonesia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and North and South America.

The religion of all preliterate societies, including Native Americans, is collectively called *animism*. Technically, animism is not so much a distinct religion as a belief or component of many religions, including Shinto, some forms of Hinduism, and neopaganism. In the United States, animistic beliefs are especially prevalent in New Age channeling and with personal spirit guides.⁸ Nevertheless, for the purpose of classification, animism can be considered the “religion” of indigenous cultures worldwide.

Like most religions, animism embraces a multiplicity of beliefs and a variety of religious practices. Nevertheless, there is one fundamental doctrine shared by all tribal societies. It has a direct bearing on what actually motivates their reverence for nature and apparent ecological sensitivity.

THE SPIRIT WORLD

The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions defines animism as, “The belief that all of reality is pervaded or inhabited by spirits or souls; the belief that all of reality is in some sense animate.”⁹ The operative word in this definition is “spirits.” The fundamental doctrine of animism is that most (if not all) living things are indwelt by spirits that have intelligence and volition identical to that of people. It is believed, for example, that many wild animals function similar to humans. They possess emotions and have the ability to reason and speak (although they usually remain silent). In fact, many animists believe that animals often have greater power and are more cunning than people.

Spirits may also dwell in inanimate objects and natural phenomena, such as trees, rocks, lightning, wind, rivers, lakes, caves, mountains, and numerous other strategic places. Wherever their locale, these spirits are considered unpredictable. They may be either malevolent or benevolent, and people must be careful to pay them proper respect and not to offend them.

Although most tribal cultures acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being, religious activities usually focus on the spirit world. Through sacrifices, prayers, and especially rituals, tribal people hope to appease the host of spirits that lurk throughout nature. The purpose of these activities is not to praise the spirits or nature itself, but to ward off evil, such as sickness and barren wives, and to enlist the aid of spiritual forces to help the tribe enjoy the good things in life: many children, successful hunting, plenty of food, wealth, respect, and long life.

The belief that a potentially hostile spirit world permeates all of nature is key to understanding the motivation behind many nature-honoring rituals—and tribal societies’ apparent reverence for nature. It turns out that this “reverence” is based more on fear than veneration. In their book, *Understanding Folk Religions*, Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tie’nou wrote, “A final worldview theme that runs through nearly all folk religious belief systems is near constant fear and the need for security. In a world

full of spirits, witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, curses, bad omens, broken taboos, angry ancestors, human enemies, and false accusations of many kinds, life is rarely carefree and secure.”¹⁰

So, on the one hand, tribal cultures possess a sense of kinship, respect, dependence, and gratitude toward their natural environments. On the other hand, every event in life—health, safety, marriage, childbirth, hunting, sowing, and building—is potentially at the mercy of harmful spiritual forces that must be manipulated or appeased.

Although the religious beliefs and practices observed in tribal societies are closely bound to nature, revering nature for nature’s sake is not their intent. Any apparent concern for nature’s welfare arising out of animism is a *side effect*, a byproduct, and not doctrine. Ecological sensitivity is incidental to acts of appeasement toward a hostile spirit world. It is not due to a benevolent relationship among deity, humans, and nature.

This is not to say that tribal people cannot feel a sense of wonder, awe, and reverence toward nature alongside of their religious beliefs. Of course they can—just the same as any other human being. Moreover, many tribal people today have a genuine, heartfelt desire to live in harmony with nature and promote environmental stewardship. But such reverence and desires are without a theological framework. Animism contains no religious principles or doctrines that give specific instructions on environmental stewardship.

Christianity, on the other hand, possesses the theological framework necessary for formulating environmental ethics and providing guidance in environmental stewardship. God personally and willfully created the natural world (Gen. 1:1; Heb. 11:3). It belongs to him (Ps. 24:1; 50:10–11). God takes pleasure in *all* creation (Gen. 1:31) and provides water, food, and habitats for wildlife (Ps. 104). Nature has value apart from (but never above) humanity (Gen. 9:8–11; Jon. 4:11). The Bible embraces ecologically sensitive principles that can be applied directly to environmental conservation and stewardship (e.g. Lev. 19: 23–25; 25:1–7; Deut. 22:6–7; 23:12–13). Moreover, beginning with Adam and Eve, God assigned to the entire human race the responsibility to be his caretakers—his stewards—over creation (Gen. 1:28; 2:15, 19; 7:1–3).

Douglas Hayward, professor of anthropology at Biola University, observes that animists seek answers to the same “common existential questions asked by people everywhere”:

1. Can I find help in confronting the problems of living?
2. Can I find healing in times of sickness?
3. Can I find protection from malevolent beings?
4. How can I discharge my obligation to supernatural beings that may interact with me and my world?
5. How can I find meaning in life and in particular meaning to pain and suffering?
6. What is the source or origin of evil?¹¹

Sadly, in animistic societies, their answers to these fundamental questions are shrouded in fear and ignorance. The only reliable answers must flow from an understanding of the true nature of God and victory over the demonic spiritual world.

Here Jesus Christ becomes a beacon of hope and light. Christian missionaries and evangelists can provide trustworthy answers to these questions and faithful testimonies that Jesus has defeated the sinister spiritual beings that allegedly lurk throughout nature (Col. 1:13; Heb. 2:14). This allows animists (and all people) to enjoy nature and harvest its fruits—its foods, medicines, energy resources, and building materials—in a balanced economy that protects nature and its wild denizens against exploitation and abuse. This is the true “kinship” relationship with nature that God desires the human race to enjoy.

Dan Story is a Christian apologist and author of five books. This article is adapted from his current project, *Is God an Environmentalist?* Dan can be contacted at www.danstory.net.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth McAlister, "Voodoo's View of the Quake in Haiti," *The Washington Post*, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/01/voodoos_view_of_the_earthquake_in_haiti.html, 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 108. Chapter 4 gives a detailed account of how fire was used by Native Americans.
4. Excerpted from volume 1 of George Catlin, *North American Indians: Being Letters and Notes on Their Manners, Customs, and Conditions, Written During Eight Years' Travel amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America, 1832-1839*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Leary, Stuart and Co., 1913), in "America Needs a National Park," *American Environmentalism*, ed. Greg Barton (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 172. See also Krech, chap. 5.
5. Krech, 215-20.
6. Quoted in Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), 171.
7. Estimates vary on the worldwide population of indigenous peoples. For a list of various population estimates and their sources, see [HTTP://WWW.ADHERENTS.COM/NA/NA_539.HTM](http://WWW.ADHERENTS.COM/NA/NA_539.HTM).
8. Dean C. Halverson, "Animism: The Religion of the Tribal World," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 15, 2 (April-June, 1998): 59 (http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/15_2_PDFs/01_Halverson_05.pdf).
9. Keith Crim, gen. ed., *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 37.
10. Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tie'nou, *Understanding Folk Religions: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 87.
11. Douglas J. Hayward, "The Evangelization of Animists: Power, Truth or Love Encounter?" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14, 4 (October-December, 1997): http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/14_4_PDFs/01_Hayward_Animism.pdf.

We need environmentalists because they are the ones that help us understand the environment that surrounds us, and how to take care of nature. They show us unknown creatures and plants that they have discovered that we never knew existed. Environmentalists are extremely important to me and even to you. Who will take care of the oil spill? Environmentalists. Animist Environmentalism. Chapter 1. January 2004 with 3 Reads. How we measure 'reads'. A 'read' is counted each time someone views a publication summary (such as the title, abstract, and list of authors), clicks on a figure, or views or downloads the full-text. Learn more. DOI:

10.1057/9781403982353_12. [Show full abstract] for-profit companies can significantly and quickly improve their environmental performance is of vital importance. Read more. Chapter. environmentalist definition: 1. a person who is interested in or studies the environment and who tries to protect it from being damaged. Learn more. environmentalist. This is essential reading for all environmentalists, managers and scientists wishing to keep abreast of current developments in environmental science. From Cambridge English Corpus. Activists define themselves through their causes, as civil-rights workers, feminists, environmentalists, and the like.