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*New World, New Values:*

*Religion, Belief and Survival on a Small Planet*

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# *New World, New Values:*

## *Religion, Belief and Survival on a Small Planet*

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Concerned citizens across the globe are troubled by the big problems before us. Doctors wake from their sleep, worried that, after all, there just might not be an effective cure to stop the world-wide epidemic, which in the last several months has become the leading cause of adult death in several Third World cities. Four warm days in a row in early spring are regarded with a sense of uneasy suspicion and foreboding, and jokes about global warming are shared among friends with nervous laughter. To top it all off, the atmospheric scientists are now telling us that the stratospheric ozone is disappearing at twice the rate that they previously thought.

We cannot help but become a bit uneasy both about the reliability of scientific measurements and the glib optimism of the political and managerial elites who continue to assure us that if only they are elected or their advice is acted upon, everything will remain under control. I think we all sense this is not true. Mid-western tornados and Bangladesh floods remind us that in Nature things can get out of control, sometimes wildly so, and if we have been fortunate enough to have been spared this round of tragedy, perhaps this will not always be the case.

The noted anthropologist and student of religious behavior, Clifford Geertz, once pointed out that: "Cultures, like people, find their religions in foxholes." By this he meant, I think, that it is in times of social stress or collective crisis that the religious traditions of a group are most poignantly experienced and quintessentially defined. If Geertz is correct -- and it seems probable that he is -- we should not be surprised that religious revival movements are emerging with ever more insistent claims for our attention. In ecological terms we are, after all, certainly in a collective "foxhole," and more and more people are coming to this personal realization with the strength of emotional conviction that resembles a traditional religious conversion experience. In response to collective doubt or impending disaster, humans shore up their convictions and affirm their faith. As the ecological crisis becomes more pronounced, fundamentalisms of all kinds are everywhere on the rise.

The question remains: is this appropriate behavior? Or, more to the point, are those beliefs and convictions that

are asserted in increasingly dogmatic tones really helpful for our collective survival on this small planet? or are they, in fact, a substantial source of our collective problem in the first place? If this latter circumstance turns out to be the case, where does that leave us? The biblical observation is often repeated that "Where there is no vision, the people perish." But it is equally true that when visions abound, and the *wrong ones* are embraced, the people surely perish with similar rapidity. How are we to proceed in this circumstance? What can we say about religion, belief and survival on a small planet? What new values are required in this new world we have come to inhabit? How are we to derive these values?

It was to address these questions that I have spent the last few years in a Divinity School. I am trained as an anthropologist and an historian, but I was fortunate enough to receive a HENRY LUCE FELLOWSHIP to explore these issues at Harvard Divinity School. This explains -- for those of you who might be wondering -- why a social scientist might find himself grappling with the problems of religious belief.

After some weeks at the Divinity School it became apparent to me that theologians and anthropologists generally approach the phenomena of belief and religion from contrasting perspectives. Indeed, the subject matter itself is differently defined. It seems that for professional theologians it is important to focus upon textual statements by individuals or groups concerning their shared beliefs, common convictions, or individual spiritual revelations.

Anthropologists take a somewhat different tack to the problem of religious belief. Having worked mostly with peoples who have no written traditions, anthropologists try to discern beliefs from patterns of thought and behavior, not from texts. Texts are problematic primarily because literacy as well as literature is a highly conditioned phenomena. Just who is allowed to read and write and what is read and written is highly controlled in any culture. Therefore, it is not always reliable to consult texts alone to understand collective beliefs.

Instead anthropologists define belief in somewhat different terms. Theirs is a simple-minded definition. For anthropologists your beliefs are those things which guide

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your behavior when you don't know what you are doing. When you *know* what you are doing you are in the realm of reason, rational discourse, argumentation, dispute and judgment. But most of us, most of the time, just do things -- not because we have rationally judged all the alternatives and concluded such and such, but rather because we *believe* they are the right things to do next. How do we *know* they are right? We don't, we just have a hunch they are. Beliefs, you see, are learned very early and reinforced all the time, but they reside in the unconscious realm of behavior. They are not to be confused with "instincts" because they are not genetically inherited. Rather they are learned, but they are so thoroughly learned that they come into play as a kind of "second nature." They are the principles that guide our behavior when we are on "automatic," as it were, and as such they are rarely ever questioned. They constitute the unstated premises or assumptions of daily life.

For an anthropologist religious beliefs are a small but important subset of beliefs in general. Here again, though, anthropologists approach the whole phenomena of religion slightly differently than textually oriented commentators. For anthropologists something is said to be "religious" because of the degree of emotional weight devoted to or invested in it. Thus, religious beliefs are simply those unconscious principles which are believed in religiously. They constitute, in a sense, the non-negotiable beliefs which will be defended -- often despite undeniable experience to the contrary. What is at stake here is the quality or depth -- not the content -- of belief. The old adage helps us understand this: "right or wrong, my religion is strong." In other words, religious beliefs are those unconscious assumptions which, when challenged, we are more likely to defend than to examine.

For example, it would appear that collectively we believe religiously in "Amerika." Whatever else the Gulf war may have proved, it certainly demonstrated that when they feel their country is challenged, a large number of citizens can be counted upon to come to an immediate and unreflective defense of the principles of American supremacy. Moreover, it seems that our culture believes religiously in the notion of progress and the possibility of continuous economic growth. Most fundamentally in our age we believe religiously in techno-scientific salvationism -- that is to say, the ability of science and technology to reveal to us how to manipulate the world so as to save ourselves from collective catastrophe.

The question now becomes: can we survive on this small planet with these sets of religious beliefs? Do our dearly held unconscious assumptions as individuals, social groups or as a species put us on a collision course with the way the ecosystem actually works? If we hold our beliefs up for examination and scrutiny can we winnow out those beliefs that threaten our collective survival on this small planet? Can we ever hope to appropriate new

beliefs based on the growing knowledge of what is required for species survival in a complex ecosystem?

My own suspicion is that in the Western world many of our religiously held beliefs are not survivable. Further, it seems to me clear that all of us need to turn our attention to this problem. This is not simply a realm for specialized debate and endless erudition on the part of textual scholars, "religious leaders" or professional theologians. Just as our economy is too important to be left to economists alone, and political decisions are too important to be left to the politicians alone, so too our beliefs are far too important to be left to professional divines. If we expect to survive as a culture and as a species for very long into the next millennia, our system of public belief -- what some might call our "public theology" -- is in drastic need of reformation.

We need, in short, to examine our beliefs like we are beginning to examine all other aspects of our life in the ecosystem. We have come to accept that we must ask: is our food system sustainable? is our waste system sustainable? is our energy system sustainable? In the same manner, all of us need to ask ourselves with candor and humility, are those things which our culture has taught us to believe in religiously truly survivable on this small planet? If what the scientists are telling us about global change is true, it would seem that the ecosystem will simply not tolerate, without severe retribution, the abuse we have, in the past, inflicted upon it in the pursuit of our religiously held belief in economic growth.

As this becomes apparent to more and more people, my hunch is that we will be on the verge of a reformation of public religion far more radical than anything witnessed to date in human history. What then will be the source of values for the new world we must live in? A simple reaffirmation of the triumphant theologies and anthropocentric values of the past will not do.

I feel that we need seriously to reflect on our system of public belief. For the new world that we confront we must seek to derive our values from both the emerging revelations of ecosystem science and the prophetic insights of past theological traditions. A theology is, after all, a particular theory of human limit in creation. Each culture and epoch has had its own functional theology appropriate to its own experience of human limitation. Thus, it is not that we need to dispense with theology and religion. On the contrary, now -- perhaps more than ever -- we desperately need a strong and rigorous statement of the principles of human limit. Moreover we need to begin to believe religiously in the principle of human limits if we expect to survive for very much longer in this finite world, for it is these beliefs that will condition our collective behavior when the environmental crisis mounts in the years and decades to come. If we wish to survive, we must take care now to assure that the beliefs which will unconsciously guide our behavior are themselves survivable.