11

World View

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Key Points

1. People attempting to account for their experiences make use of shared cultural assumptions about how the world works. The encompassing pictures of reality that result are called **world views**, which aim to encompass the widest possible understanding of how the world works.

Metaphors are valuable tools for constructing world views by directing attention to certain aspects of experience and downplaying or ignoring others.

2. Metaphors tend to be structured in a typical way. They are organized into the **metaphorical subject**, which represents the domain of experience, the **metaphorical predicate**, which suggests the familiar domain of experience, and the **metaphorical entailments** that link the predicate to the subject.

3. The distinction between **metonymy** and metaphor may correspond to the distinction between semantic linkages viewed as literal or true and semantic linkages viewed as hypothetical or false. If the relationships asserted in metaphors fit the rest of our accepted experience, they may be converted into accepted relationships of metonymy.

4. As people create apt metaphors that are transformed into metonymic structures of their world view, they mark the resulting semantic domains by symbols to remind themselves of their significant insights and the connections between those insights. Symbols that sum up an entire semantic domain and help make sense of experiences are called *summarizing symbols*, a term coined by Sherry Ortner. *Elaborating symbols*, by contrast, are analytic and allow people to sort out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas.

5. Differences in world views emerge from differences in experience that people try to explain by means of metaphor. People use at least three kinds of **key metaphors** as foundations for particular world views: **societal metaphors** (predicate lies in the social order), **organic metaphors** (predicate lies in the image of a living body), and **technological metaphors** (predicate lies in objects made by human beings).

6. The most familiar world view for many people is **religion**. Anthropological study of religion tends to focus on the social institutions and meaningful processes shared among a group of individuals. Individuals who are committed to religious views are convinced of the existence of beings or forces that are ordinarily invisible but actively involved in their lives. Maintaining contact with cosmic forces is very complex, and societies have complex social practices designed to ensure that this is done properly. Two important kinds of religious specialists are shamans and priests.

7. Anthropologists also research the belief in and practice of magic. Individuals attempting to explain unfortunate things that are occurring in their lives can use **witchcraft** beliefs. **Oracles** and **magic** can be employed to exert a measure of control over the actions of other people.

8. Many anthropologists have attempted to display the rich, coherent tapestries of symbols, rituals, and everyday practices that make up particular world views, noting the high degree to which world views vary from one another. They have also studied the ways in which people react to their experiences becoming unstable. When faced with dramatic changes, people often create new interpretations that they hope will help them with the changes they are experiencing. This can be accomplished through the modification of the old system to fit changing times, conversion to a new world view through **syncretism** or **revitalization**. Sometimes changes in a society are rejected and people instead choose to return to the old ways, which is referred to as **nativism**.

9. With European Enlightenment came a world view that has come to be called **secularism**. Early anthropologists believed that that the expected outcome of cultural evolution, which was

thought to be linear at that time, would be secularism. Recently though, anthropologists have been forced to reconsider the nature of secularism, prompted by a strong resistance to the secular institutions of Western nation-states. Today, an important issue remains the extent to which life in a liberal secular state is likely to be difficult and painful for those whose religious practices do not recognize any domain of life in which religious considerations do not hold sway.

10. A single society may have members who subscribe to different world views. Knowledge, like power, is not evenly distributed throughout a society. More powerful individuals and groups often impose their preferred key metaphors on the rest of society. Those without power can resist this imposition by creating their own contrasting metaphors and constructing alternative world views.

Key Terms

Key metaphors A symbolic representation that is widely understood within a culture and central to that culture's world view.

Magic A set of beliefs and practices designed to control the visible or invisible world for specific purposes.

Metaphor A form of thought and language that asserts a meaningful link between two expressions from different semantic domains.

Metaphorical entailments All the attributes of a metaphorical predicate that relate it to the metaphorical subject.

Metaphorical predicate The second part of a metaphor, which suggests the familiar domain of experience that may clarify the metaphorical subject.

Metaphorical subject The first part of a metaphor, which indicates the domain of experience that needs to be clarified.

Metonymy The culturally defined relationship of the parts of a semantic domain to the domain as a whole and of the whole to its parts.

Nativism An attempt to return to traditional customs.

Oracles Invisible forces to which people address questions and whose responses they believe to be truthful.

Organic metaphor A key metaphor whose predicate lies in the image of a living body.

Priest A religious practitioner skilled in the practice of religious rituals, which he or she carries out for the benefit of the group.

Religion "Ideas and practices that postulate reality beyond that which is immediately available to the senses."

Revitalization A conscious, deliberate, and organized attempt by some members of a society to create a more satisfying culture in a time of crisis.

Secularism The separation of religion and state.

Societal metaphor A key metaphor whose predicate lies in the social order. .

Syncretism The synthesis of old religious practices (or an old way of life) with new religious practices (or a new way of life) introduced from outside, often by force.

Technological metaphor A key metaphor whose predicate lies in objects made by human beings.

Transculturation Cultural change resulting from contact between different cultures.

Witchcraft The practice of magic, whether intentional or not.

World view An encompassing picture of reality created by members of a society.

Review Questions

1. What are some of the key metaphors in Canadian society? How do they shape our world view? Is there any link to behaviours?

2. How is a world view constructed and maintained? How can a world view be changed in it is no longer thought to be satisfactory?

3. Consider some metaphors for anger, argument, or time from North American society (see *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson) and work through the implications of these metaphors. What do they suggest about our worldview? What sorts of behaviours might they encourage? What evidence do you have of this?

4. Religion operates as a kind of social charter. Find creation stories from two different cultures and have students compare the two with each culture's social structure to test this hypothesis.

5. What is the struggle with secularism in North America?

6. What is the difference between religious belief and a belief in witchcraft?

7. What is the relationship between worldview and power?

8. Does the Azande witchcraft, oracles, and magic belief system constitute a reasonable system of thinking linking cause, effect and cure?

9. Is religious syncretism an inevitable part of all religions?

10. Are religious revitalization movements only found under circumstances cultural oppression?

11. What are some of the religious and secular elements behind the French ban on Muslim headscarves?

12. Are there still examples of cultures that resort to nativism as a response to colonialism, change or modernity?

Additional Resources

Films

- *For Those Who Sail to Heaven*. Directed by Elizabeth Wickett. Icarus Films. 1990.

  This film depicts the rites of the Egyptian Opet festival and the people who have carried it forward from ancient times to the present day.
  http://icarusfilms.com/cat97/f-j/for_thos.html

- *Gods and Satans* (*Dieux et Satans*). Directed by Martine Journet and Gerard Nougarol. Le Miroir. 2005.

  This film depicts the conflict between a traditional Indonesian shaman and her nephew who has recently converted to Christianity.

Annotated Video Links

- Anthropology in 10 or Less: An Anthropology of Religion
  A concise but comprehensive review of some of the big ideas behind the anthropology of religion.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8lMlxary04

- The Big Story: Origins of Religion
  A short presentation that runs through the range of speculative possibilities regarding the origins of religion.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9mFNgu6Cww

- Anthropology Shorts: Mary Douglas on Purity and Danger
  This presentation provides an excellent review and summation of Mary Douglas's theories from her book "Purity and Danger" and touches on the classical work of Arnold van Gennep.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wI3Xm2Qbcqg

- Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction to Folk Religion and Magic, Palomar College

  A tutorial on the variations in religious experience from around the world.
  http://anthro.palomar.edu/religion/default.htm

- Canadian Secular Alliance

  The Canadian Secular Alliance is a non-profit organization "advancing church-state separation and the neutrality of government in matters of religion."
  http://secularalliance.ca/

A Critical Look
BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

Religion: From the Dark Seeking Our Brighter Selves

From the distant past emerge early memories of our transcendental selves. These memories come to us through artifacts, monuments, and, eventually, fragmentary scripts in ancient languages—some of which we have deciphered, some of which we have not. While the visions and voices of people in strictly oral traditions became silent over time, writing made things more permanent. Written religious texts became testaments that preserved ideas across time, and translations of these testaments allowed their messages to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers. Thus certain religions came to frame world views and afterworld views that resonated for many. They became "world religions," transcending space and time.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all examples of world religions that have flourished for many centuries. All three focus on a single supreme deity and inform on obligations to this deity and to our fellow humans. Do these three religions exist in their original forms? Yes and no. Their core messages have remained the same, passed down to followers through their written holy texts, but in many cases their interpretations have changed in response to emerging social and cultural needs. These interpretations have been recorded and passed along in "subsidiary" or "secondary" texts, which are numerous and continue to expand as these religions evolve.

Each of these three religions has developed wide and various "sects," and each has spawned alternative ways of representing its core messages in daily life. Internal divisions have not always been peaceful, at times leading to religious conflict and even war. When conflict arises, concepts of God are often co-opted as one or both sides come to believe that God is on "their side" and, therefore, that their actions are "right." Indeed, religious texts have at times been used to give legitimacy to various rulers or to state structures and actions, including acts of violence against certain groups. This has been and remains a challenge.

Unfortunately, the connection between religious beliefs and violence against other human beings is not new. Archaeological evidence suggests that fighting wars and killing to eliminate groups and individuals to appease various spirits or deities seems to run deep in our human past. For example, we can look to the First Sacred War of the ancient Greeks, which lasted from 595 BCE to 585 BCE. War may even be part of our primate heritage if we consider chimpanzee "wars" (see Jane Goodall's [2010] discussion of the "Four-Year War" among chimpanzees of Gombe). Although it is stretching it to attribute such wars to concepts of the transcendental held by humans, the concepts of "us" and "them," and of territory, are evident in such examples.

While religion can lead us to our better selves, it can also be used for horrible things. Too often, it drives fanatics who are focused on specific scripts or egotistically entrenched in their own visions of meaning to become leaders of destructive movements devised for self-aggrandizement or political objectives. In the relatively recent past, we could cite the 1978 mass suicide of 909 members of Jim Jones's cult in Jonestown, Guyana. Or we could cite Marshall Applewhite's UFO–millenarian cult Heaven's Gate, which led to 38 members committing suicide in March 1997, after Applewhite told them that by doing so they could hitch a ride on a "spacecraft" that was trailing the Hale–Bopp comet. And Canada has not been immune to this form of religious cultism. The Order of the Solar Temple, operating mainly in Quebec, France, Switzerland, Australia, and Martinique, is another significant example; it resulted in the deaths of an estimated 77 people. Initially, the Order's objectives placed emphasis on the spiritual over the secular in preparation for the second coming of Christ, but the movement turned deadly as its leaders (Joseph Di Mambro and Luc Jouret) came to focus on money and political power.

Deadly groups with toxic religious interpretations or idiosyncratic pseudo-religious messages seem to dominate in areas of conflict. Such dominance is not new—consider the Crusades (1095–1269), which were driven by the Catholic pope's direction to "take back" the Holy Land from the Muslims. This was a time of great unrest in Europe, a time of deep poverty for most people and economic upheaval in a corrupt feudal system. In some senses, the Crusades were much like the violent shows at the Colosseum in Rome—spectacle instead of substance, cruel circuses that provided diversion for the masses while elites maintained their positions of power and domination.

Today we live in a world of great change where certain pseudo-religious messages resonate in horrible and destructive ways. These messages are often promoted by destructive groups that maintain their own twisted interpretations of religious beliefs. Indeed, the difference today is the size of the leaders' operational forces, their acquisition of armaments, and the scope of their ambitions at the expense of other human beings. And truly we live in a new world of communication, a world with an immediacy that would boggle the mind of the Jim Jones types of the past. That these new leaders and their messages of death resonate with so many young men from diverse backgrounds is a matter for serious consideration and deep critical analysis.

Cynical designs to destroy in the name of religion are manipulations of our better selves as we seek meaning in our lives. Here we must ask: Who profits, and to what end? Such machinations take away the potential to celebrate our beingness and to bring positive change to our world. But we can turn to the light and be there for a moment of brightness, and we can invite others to witness, in their way, with us. Together, we can celebrate life and diversity, and we can try to effect positive change in a world that is full of both beauty and challenges.