

The Geographic Centricity of Belief Systems

Chuck Thomas, 1/16/2008

Individuals base a lot of our self-image on our cultural identity. This identity can take many forms: ancestral heritage, ethnicity, religion, language, wealth class, education level, profession, and so on. Each of us has a mix of these to lean on for self-worth support. Whatever the sources, we individually maintain a belief system that help us sort out our world view... and help us mold our behavior. Civilization depends on that... that individuals can act in concert in their behaviors *to a degree* so that communities can flourish without chaos.

But, and this is the reason for this commentary, because my own or your own community holds a belief system different from another's belief system, it does not mean that ours is "right" and theirs is "wrong", or that we are good and they are bad. The belief system is simply a basis for human beings to develop community, and is not inherently the "correct" system. There is no such thing. The particulars of the belief system can include religious beliefs, political leanings, national identity, or even sport team loyalty.

Religious systems are based on the concept of faith... they are frequently referred to as "faiths".¹ Each faith has its historic roots in some set of facts or fiction or combination thereof that rationalize or justify its existence and create a moral compass to persuade the community that this is the best way for the community to prosper. The faith develops and is passed down through familial inheritance so that each succeeding generation is raised in the tenets of the family faith. Children grow up with others in the neighborhood getting along by identifying with the common behavior ties that the faith has instilled in the family belief system. Some of the tenets come from economic, health, or other survival basis: eating pigs or shellfish may be a very good thing or a very bad thing. It may depend on whether pigs or shellfish are economically necessary for the local economy or cannot be trusted for health safety reasons. It becomes a part of the belief system.

The community needs to develop several things to maintain the belief system in tact: a source of the *raison d'etre*, a method for vetting behavior in relation to the system, and an authoritative voice of the system. Being most familiar with christianity, the faith of my heritage, I'll use it as an overly simple example. First, there was the old testament idea of a god, and then came Jesus, the perfect human who explained the way to behave. The writings explaining this to codify the faith were "inspired" by god and they became the bible. The church was formed and created its hierarchy to ensure compliance. "God's son, Jesus, said this is the way to behave, it is documented in the bible which came from god, and we, the church, will educate and help you follow it." Something like that.

Now, in our complex and much larger and diverse society (and by that, I mean anything larger than a village), variations to the theme naturally occur. And from far away, somewhat different reasons for faith's existence develop. So, we develop variances to our

¹ Please note that I capitalize nations and regions, but not religions or religious symbols. This is that I am maintaining my own belief system: that god is a fictional symbol and not a person. I capitalize Jesus (a supposed actual person), but not christianity, for example.

core systems and even different core systems. You know what is next... defending our faith! We rationalize how ours is correct and the others are, well, evil. When, in fact, they were all formed for pretty much the same reasons.

You might ask, "But aren't the religions of the world formed to explain unknown?". The simple answer might be, that may be partly true. The base idea of a god helps us understand what we cannot understand or know what we do not know. The evolution of religion follows the evolution of complex societies. Where the gods or god once made the lightning, now the god is responsible for the creation of the universe. That is because we have better explanations and understanding of the source of lightning, but not how the universe was formed.

My explanation of why belief systems are a reasonable basis for providing a standard of community behavior, but not for inter-community relationships, is that the geographic centrality of each system ipso facto gives lie to the validity of the system. The behaviors that people of one faith find so absurd in those of another faith are rooted in the mind prison our faith puts us in. A Western person has trouble understanding that direct and concise description is not correct for an Eastern person. An American may have a problem understanding the use of burq'a of Afghanistan, not understanding the hajib (dress code for muslims). A muslim is not accustomed to the dress code (or lack thereof) of the American female. And so it goes.

When we in America view the Middle East, we are astonished at the anger felt toward America and the West in general. My explanation for this will appear in another of my commentaries, so look for that.