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Effects of Religion upon Environmental Concern: A Study of Attitudes and Behaviors

Emily Burns & Professor Lauren Shapiro Crane
Kenyon College Summer Science Fellowship



Abstract

This study aimed to identify any influence religion might have upon how people conceive of and behave toward the natural world. We predicted that Christians and Buddhists would exhibit different attitudes and behaviors toward the environment for two reasons. First, Buddhists (like collectivist cultures) tend to view the universe as interconnected, while Christians (like individualist cultures) tend to see it as more hierarchical (White, 1967; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Second, Buddhists tend to believe in Reincarnation, which would mean they personally come back and experience life on Earth again. Christians, in contrast, tend to believe that the soul goes to one realm for eternity (Heaven or Hell), so their experience on Earth is limited to this lifetime. We hypothesized that Buddhists would be more likely than Christians to view themselves as integrated with the natural world and would thus be more concerned about it and report more pro-environmental behavior. We also hypothesized that Christians, conversely, would see themselves as separate from and superior to the natural world, and thus they would be more relaxed about it and view pro-environmental behavior as a lower priority. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Buddhists and 12 Christians and then coded. The results supported our hypothesis that Buddhists would see themselves as inherently interconnected with the natural world, and that Christians were more likely to see themselves as separate from and above it. However, Buddhists expressed only slightly more concern about the environment than Christians, and neither religion nor level of concern had any influence on the tendency to participate in pro-environmental behavior. Therefore, the results indicate that religion does influence how a person conceives of the environment and, to an extent, how concerned they are about it, but not necessarily how they will behave toward it.

Motivation for Research

1. Religion should have an influence on environmentalism (White, 1967; Swearer, 1997)

Buddhists and Christians should have different ways of looking at the relationship between humans and the environment.

2. Buddhist Beliefs Relevant to Environmentalism

- humanity is inherently interconnected with the natural world (Markus & Kitayama, 1991)
- after death, we are reincarnated back onto Earth

Hypothesis 1: Buddhists, particularly those who believe in Reincarnation and who see humanity as interconnected with nature, will feel more concerned about the future of the environment, and thus pro-environmental behavior will be a priority.

3. Christian Beliefs Relevant to Environmentalism

- humanity is superior to the natural world (White, 1967)
- after life on Earth, we go to Heaven or Hell for eternity (as explained in the Bible)

Hypothesis 2: Christians—particularly those who believe in Heaven and Hell and who see humanity as above nature—will feel relatively untroubled about the future of the environment, and thus pro-environmental behavior will not be a priority.

Method

Participants

- All were equally divided by gender and were born and raised in the U.S.
- Christians: 6 Catholics and 6 Methodists from 6 different churches that were randomly selected in the Columbus area.
- Buddhists: 10 participants from 5 different temples in the Columbus, Cincinnati, and Cleveland areas. An array of sects were represented.

Procedure

- The interviewer and participant met in a quiet place, like a room of the religious center or a local café.
- The interviews usually lasted around 30 minutes and were tape-recorded.
- Interviews were then transcribed and coded by the researchers.

Sample Interview Questions

- 1) There are many issues being debated in the news today, and the state of the environment is one of them. Some people feel that this is an issue of grave importance, while others say our cause for alarm is being blown way out of proportion. Where would you say you fall on this continuum?
- 2) Some people put a lot of time and energy into doing things like recycling, making their homes more energy-efficient, searching out recycled products, and avoiding disposable items. However, others feel that their time and energy are better spent directed toward other things that they see as more important. Where would you put yourself on this continuum?
- 3) How would you describe the appropriate relationship between human beings and the natural world?
- 4) There are many different views about what happens to a person when that person dies. What do you believe happens to the average person after death?

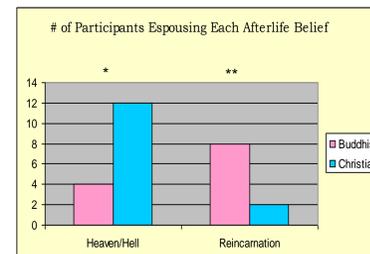


Research Findings

Religious Ideology

1) Afterlife Beliefs

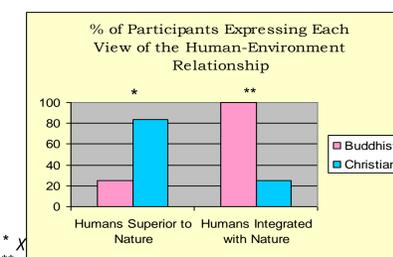
- Reincarnation: belief that we are reborn on Earth after death.
- Heaven/Hell: belief that we live one life on Earth and then go to Heaven or Hell for eternity.



* $\chi^2(3) = 12.86, p = .005$
** $\chi^2(3) = 16.88, p = .001$

2) Humanity's relationship to the natural world:

- a. people as superior to nature
 - "I think we've come to take for granted this Earth of ours." (S3)
 - "I want it [the Earth] to be here for my kids and my grandchildren." (S8)
- b. people as integrated with nature
 - "We don't pay attention; we're not in harmony. If we were, many of the natural disasters that we wail over wouldn't occur." (S16)
 - "Just preserving that unmanipulated space [wilderness], discovering it and going in a respectful way to go see it, is very much like preserving and discovering the unmanipulated space in yourself." (S2)

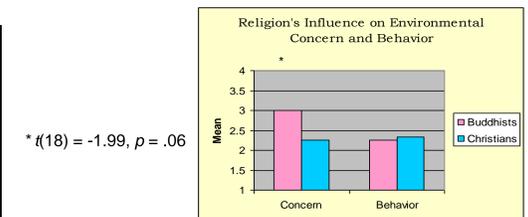
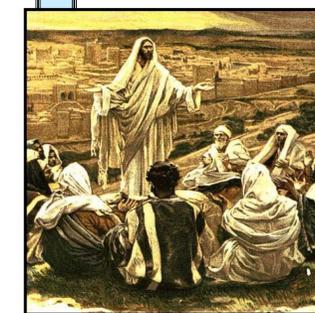


* $\chi^2(1) = 10.91, p = .001$

Caring About the Environment

- 1) Concern: overall tone of concern in the interview
- 2) Behavior: amount of pro-environmental behavior reported in interview.

Note: Higher levels of concern did not correlate with higher levels of pro-environmental behavior, $r(20) = .22, p = .34$.



* $t(18) = -1.99, p = .06$

Conclusions

1. **Buddhists were much more likely to view humans and nature as inherently interconnected, while Christians were more likely to view humans as separate from and superior to nature.**
2. **People with an integrative view of the human-environment relationship expressed significantly more concern than those who viewed this relationship in terms of separation.**
3. **However, Buddhists expressed only slightly more environmental concern than Christians.**
4. **Buddhists and Christians did not differ in terms of actual behavior toward the environment.**
5. **Surprisingly, higher levels of environmental concern did not predict a higher likelihood of engaging in pro-environmental behavior.**
6. **Religion does influence how people conceive of the environment and, to an extent, how concerned they are about it, but not necessarily how they will behave toward it.**

References

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