

Contemporary Controversy Between Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Modern Development: Environmentalism VS Economic Growth

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Jason Brown Global Humanities 130 course *Introduction to Religious Studies*. The assignment asked students to do research on a contemporary controversy on selected religion and give suggestions. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

This paper explores the controversy between Indigenous religious beliefs and modern development, which emanates from the conflicting worldviews in regard to the relationship between humanity and nature. Modern industrial development is economically driven and focuses on infrastructure, energy production and agricultural growth; it often implies environmental destruction and loss of Indigenous sacred sites. The paper discusses how development disrupts ecological balance and violates traditional Indigenous values through examining the cases of the Dakota Pipeline, the Amazon hydroelectric power plants, the Arctic oil drilling and the deforestation in Brazil due to the expansion of soybean cultivation. Indigenous beliefs value interconnectedness and sustainability, in contrast, modern development models generally focus on resource extraction for profit. The paper concludes with suggestions for strengthening legal protection of Indigenous lands, enforcing negotiation, and incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into the planning of developments, toward a balance between economic development and cultural and environmental protection.

Introduction

In this era of extremely rapid urban growth, a deep-seated dispute has emerged between Indigenous religious worldviews and modern industrial priorities. It challenges how we define our relationship with the natural world and balance modern development with environmental conservation. Differences in the values that Indigenous peoples hold towards nature and public society have created tensions and conflicts between the two, especially when governments and businesses ignore the spiritual significance of natural spaces to promote their projects. For many Indigenous communities, natural resources such as land, water, plants, and animals are sacred entities integrated into their cultural and religious identity (Quannah Yellow Cloud and Redvers 2023). In contrast, contemporary development strategies often view nature as a tool for economic gain, prioritizing infrastructure and industrialization. This article will explore the core of this controversy, which is the distinct attitudes toward nature, and how it reflects deeper differences in worldviews through real-life examples to help understand and propose possible suggestions for balancing the priorities of both sides in the end.

Infrastructure and Urbanization vs. Sacred Lands

Contemporary society views infrastructure as the fundamental basis for both economic development and societal advancement. Businesses and governments focus on constructing tunnels and highways along with other infrastructural projects to support population expansion and enhance trade efficiency. Projects of this nature are generally considered vital for boosting national economic competitiveness. Large infrastructure developments cause displacement of both ecosystems and communities through deforestation, land clearing, and water system redirection, leading to serious repercussions on Indigenous territories (Scheidel et al. 2023). The way that these projects treat nature directly opposes Indigenous people's reverence for their environment and risks destroying ancestral sites they hold sacred. For example, the Dakota Access Pipeline construction (which started in June 2016 and ended in April 2017) poses a serious threat to sacred water sources and ancestral burial sites belonging to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The Indigenous communities voiced their objections but the project proceeded regardless. The Dakota Access Pipeline project demonstrates

modern development's disregard for Indigenous perspectives while prioritizing economic interests (Smithsonian 2018). Modern development practices demonstrate their destructive nature by eliminating Indigenous sacred spaces while disregarding their cultural importance.

The Indigenous belief system is rooted in animism and totemism. For Indigenous communities, land is more than just a physical territory. The lands hold spirituality and cultural meaning, representing the connection to their ancestors. They view mountains, rivers, forests and caves as sacred entities. Each of them has a spiritual presence or guardian. These natural features are not only material resources but also sites for practicing religious rituals and recording cultural memories (Quannah Yellow Cloud and Redvers 2023). The land is seen as a gift passed down from generation to generation, and descendants continue to live on the land. The destruction of these places is not only an environmental loss but also a spiritual violation. For instance, a 46,000-year-old sacred Indigenous site, Juukan Gorge in Australia, was dynamited by Rio Tinto to expand mining (Wahlquist 2020). The action sparked global outrage and demonstrated the profound disrespect that can result when economic ambitions ignore Indigenous spiritual traditions. Just as Chief Seattle said in his 1854 speech, “Every part of this earth is sacred to my people... the shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors.” (Chief Seattle 1854) This quote encapsulates the deep spiritual connection to the land. The infrastructure projects not only destroy ecosystems but also sever the spiritual and ancestral ties that define Indigenous cosmology.

Energy Development vs. Sacred Ecologies

In the energy aspect, modern economies are increasingly dependent on large-scale energy development to meet the needs of population and economic growth. Related modern developments include fossil fuel extraction, hydroelectric dam construction, and logging. These are generally seen as necessary activities to ensure national energy security and create jobs. Yet, these energy projects are often conducted on or near Indigenous lands. For example, hydroelectric dams built in Brazilian Amazon have flooded large tracts of forest, caused irreversible damage to the ecosystem. The dams also lead to large-scale deforestation while providing energy for national consumption (Fearnside 2016). This is not an isolated case; oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been

opposed by the Gwich' Tribe, threatening ecologically and spiritually valuable caribou calving grounds (NARF 2021). These projects often ignore Indigenous objections in the interest of profit, demonstrating that they prioritize short-term energy goals over long-term environmental and cultural sustainability.

From the perspective of many Indigenous communities, energy extraction projects directly infringe upon spiritual landscapes and religious values. Energy development that disturbs animals, rivers and forests is not only devastating to the environment, it is also devastating to spiritual significance. Continuing with the previous example, the Gwich'in consider caribou herds to be sacred and an integral part of their way of life. Oil drilling in the Arctic threatens caribou breeding grounds, which the Gwich'in people consider to be "sacred places where life begins" (NARF 2021). Additionally, Indigenous communities often attribute ecological balance to a spiritual harmony between humans and nature. Excessive resource extraction disrupts this harmony, leading to biodiversity loss and rising global temperatures. All of this further influences Indigenous religious practices related to seasonal and ecological cycles. Energy extraction projects infringe on Indigenous religions and are rooted in a disregard for Indigenous beliefs in the sacredness of nature.

Agricultural Expansion vs. Ecological Spiritual Balance

Modern agricultural promotion also affects the living practices of Indigenous peoples. As the global population grows, the demand for food production also increases. Governments and corporations often promote industrial agriculture (deforestation, irrigation, and monoculture) and consider it as the most efficient way to meet food needs. These practices are supported by subsidies and large-scale land conversion. However, these developments often come at the expense of biodiversity and traditional Indigenous land use. For example, how soy expansion in the Cerrado region of Brazil has led to severe deforestation and land degradation, threatening biodiversity and the cultural sustainability of Indigenous communities (Rausch et al. 2019). Industrial agriculture values output, efficiency, and global market integration over local sustainability. The management practices that Indigenous people have used to maintain soil health, plant diversity and forest cover for generations are often overlooked. It is important to note that destroying forests to open up farmland not only reduces the resilience of the

environment but also leads to the loss of sacred spaces and Indigenous traditional religious practices related to nature.

Indigenous agricultural and ecological knowledge is closely intertwined with religious and cultural traditions. Indigenous farming and gathering methods do not emphasize domination of nature, but rather the pursuit of balance and reciprocity. Their religious practices are integrated into their diet, with rituals, taboos and respect for plants and animals ensuring sustainability. For example, in the Asháninka community of Bajo Jimíriqui, Peru, women use herbal decoctions not only as medicine but also as spiritual tools to protect and nurture their children (Luziatelli et al., 2010). These practices reflect the Indigenous worldview that the forest is both a healer and a sacred being. Modern agriculture driven by deforestation and chemical inputs destroys this spiritual ecosystem. As traditional lands are cleared or polluted, Indigenous communities lose access to sacred plants, medicinal species, and cultural knowledge that guides their sustainable use for future generations. The replacement of biodiverse forests by industrial areas is not only a loss of territory, but also a loss of belief systems and generations of wisdom of Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

The ongoing debate between Indigenous beliefs and modern developments highlights a larger divide in attitudes toward humans' relationship with nature. As this article explores, there is a root conflict between the values of Indigenous religions and the modern social development model that prioritizes economic growth. Reconciling these perspectives is not only a matter of respect and social justice, but also of the survival of the Earth. In the generation of climate change, environmental degradation, and cultural loss, we must learn how to treat nature from Indigenous belief systems that emphasize interconnectedness and sustainability. A sustainable future requires respecting the inevitability of economic progress and the sacred wisdom of protecting nature over thousands of years. By valuing land based on the resources it provides and the spiritual and cultural dimensions it represents, society can move toward a regenerative development model.

Here are some suggestions on how to ease the controversy over Indigenous beliefs and modern development. Governments and businesses must first legally

recognize and protect Indigenous land rights to resolve the deep-rooted conflict between Indigenous religious beliefs and modern development. Indigenous sacred sites should enjoy the same legal protection as national heritage sites, and existing policies and treaties must be respected and not replaced by economic agendas. It is also important to fully include Indigenous voices in the policy-making process. Indigenous communities must be consulted in advance and development should not proceed without the informed consent of the affected Indigenous communities. It is recommended to ensure the participation of Indigenous peoples in promoting modern development, combine traditional ecological knowledge with modern sustainable development practices, and create a management model that respects nature. The Indigenous attitude towards land and nature has ensured biodiversity for generations and is worth referring to.

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