



A Few Thoughts on Religions and on Belief Systems

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I am not an expert on Religions or on Belief Systems, but I am often struck by a couple of things:

1. How much the various *secular belief systems* have in common with *religious belief systems*.
2. How important aspects *other than beliefs* are to the systems.



Examples of Belief Systems

It seems like we encounter quite a number of secular belief systems, such as:

1. The Oil Drum, and our message
2. Contemporary economic theory (several different flavors)
3. He who dies with the most toys wins.
4. Beautiful bodies are everything.
5. Technology will solve all problems.
6. Anthropogenic global warming (AGW).
7. Beliefs of a political party.
8. Permaculture can save the world.

Role of a god

I have been taught that a god is anything that one attaches supreme importance to. Money can be a god. In fact, in "contemporary economic theory" and in "he who dies with the most toys wins," money becomes a god. In "technology will solve all problems," science becomes a god. In "beautiful bodies are everything," perfect bodies become a god.

I don't think that a belief system necessarily has to have a god, although it will have some articles of faith. On The Oil Drum, it is an article of faith that geological limits are of supreme importance in determining the future flow of oil. When someone (like me) suggests that this may be trumped by the indirect influence of the financial system, this is viewed as a form of heresy by some.

Anthropogenic global warming has as its central belief, the belief that man caused recent changes in climate. There are different flavors of this belief system, depending on whether one believes that one can change the course of events, and if so, what needs to be done.

Writings or stories underlying the belief system.

The Oil Drum has its series of posts. There are also related writings by people at the various ASPO organizations, and by people like Matt Simmons.

Not all of these writings would be viewed as being equally true by Oil Drum readers; some are even contradictory. The Oil Drum belief system is constantly being refined and added to.

Each of the other belief systems, as well as the religions, has its own set of stories or writings, generally by several authors. Not all are viewed equally true or important. In the "He who dies with the most toys wins" belief system, additional chapters are added each week in slick magazines advertising the things that a person must have to impress others. With enough repetition, those who adhere to a belief system consider the belief system's major points to be true and important.

Filter for viewing what happens in the world

The world is a mysterious place. Since ancient times, people have been putting together stories to try to explain their understanding of how the world operates and what it truly important. In many ways, each of these (and other) belief systems provides a way of viewing the world and determining what is truly important to our existence. To some extent, these belief systems also provide a view as to what future outcome is likely. This outcome may vary depending on what actions we take (reduce carbon dioxide emissions; increase fuel efficiency; initiate free trade; fund enough scientific research; perform the right rituals).

The belief systems also provide sayings and understandings that filter how we view the world. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want," can be viewed in many ways. It can be taken to mean that there is a God who will stop AGW and will stop any problem with oil supply (as well as any other problem). I personally don't consider this be a valid interpretation, since clearly the world is full of problems, and so far, no being has intervened to stop them, even for the very religious. The Lord is my shepherd statement can also be taken as a way of viewing the world: there is no need for concern about tomorrow, because we each have the resources we need to face the challenges ahead. We need not waste our energy on worry.

View of how we treat others

Religions probably excel in this area, with lots of sayings like, "Love your neighbor as yourself," "Honor your father and mother," and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Modern economic theory gives another view of how we treat each other. Whatever provides the most profits is "best." If this can be done by reducing the wages of workers, so be it.

Even at The Oil Drum, we have both a written and an unwritten code of how we treat each other. There is a precedent for civil discussions, and everyone knows that Leanan (or someone else) will delete their posts, if they start behaving in too abusive a manner.

Circle of friendships

Each group has its own organizations, where one gets together with other like-minded people. If one is concerned about AGW, one can join the local Sierra Club, and work together with like-minded individuals. If one believes a beautiful body is all important, there are gyms and health food stores that one can become associated with.

In a business community, one is likely to encounter a huge number of people believing contemporary economic theory. If a person raises doubts about its truth, one risks ostracism from the group.

The Oil Drum has its own online circle of friendships. Staff members particularly communicate frequently with each other. We also have quite a number of regular commenters, whom all of us look forward to hearing from.

It is this circle of friendships that is part of the reason that adopting new belief systems is difficult. If all of our friends believe one way, it is difficult to change our belief system.

Reconciling different belief systems

Each of us is likely to end up adopting at least some parts of different belief systems. Sometimes there are conflicts--what is important to one, is not necessarily as important to another. The friendship groups may be different. The way of acting may be different.

Probably the first step in reconciling belief systems is stopping to realize that there are a multitude of different belief systems "out there". One could quite easily come to the belief that *He who dies with the most toys wins* is such a statement of truth, that one need not even question it. It isn't a religion, is it? So what is there to question?

At the same time, it is easy to disregard religions, because they seem to be carry-overs from a pre-scientific era. We all know the world most likely wasn't created in seven days, and that "be fruitful and multiply" doesn't make sense in a day of modern medical treatment and overpopulation. But the unlimited growth preached by economists doesn't make any more sense, and it was developed much more recently.

Each of us needs to make his or her own choices regarding belief systems and religions. I am probably one of the few religious folks on The Oil Drum staff--not necessarily because I believe that the church's teachings are "true" in a scientific sense. I come from the liberal end of religious belief--the Bible (and religious books of other religions) have worthwhile things we can learn, especially with respect to how we treat others and how we view the world. The collection of writings is not literally true. It is more a collection of stories that have been passed down through

the ages, that we can learn from.

In the next few years, it is likely that some form of relocalization will be needed. In the USA, churches may be good centers for this type of activity, because many people are already members of a church, and have many friends there. (In Europe, I would expect the situation to be different.) This reason, apart from any other, might be a reason why some Oil Drum members might want to join a church (or other local religious group), even if a person doesn't agree with all of the beliefs. I personally would have difficulty with the more conservative religious groups, because I would have difficulty with many of their teachings. But even these groups have value for their members, providing a network of friendships and shared values.



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