

CYCLICAL VS. LINEAR TIME Christine Wright

While looking at Native American, and the English world of early America, you will find there are several differences between their religion, and view of time. Because the two communities never intermingled before the first explorers came to their shores, they had completely different views of time and space. In fact, the two societies had no idea that the other even existed. It is common belief, that while observing the Native America we discovered, the English were looking 'back in time' to a less advanced culture. This is debatable, because the view of the Native Americans did not call for advancement, like our society does; simply because they did not view time the same way.

Native American time is cyclical - of, relating to, or characterized by cycles (dictionary.com). This means, that instead of having a single line of time, going onward and onward without any stopping (as is the belief of common day America), but that time was like a circle, or a spiral. The same events would happen over and over again, in one way or another. Time, in their sense, was stoppable. Scott Momaday once explained Cyclical time, stating

"It is an interesting concept... I don't know that anyone can explain it... I think instead of being something that passes by, it is static, and people walk through time as they might walk through a canyon, and one can pause and stand in time... It isn't something that necessarily rushes by, one can take hold of it."

Linear time, pertaining to or represented by lines (dictionary.com) was the common belief of the Englishmen, and other Christian societies. Linear time is simply the view that time stretches onward into space; that it cannot be stopped, and one cannot see the end of it, because time is infinite.

One thing that can be contrasted is how religion played a part in the development of the view of time. The English at the time were predominantly Christian. The book of Genesis in the Bible explains this view of time well. The story in Genesis states that a man and a woman; Adam and Eve were created in a great Garden of the name of Eden. They were created to rule over the beasts and the Earth, but never to touch the fruits of the forbidden tree. Yet, human nature overpowered Adam and Eve, and they were cast out of the Garden, having upset God. God, cursed all human kind, sentencing us to work and toil for long hours to make our living in a place very different from the Garden. As well, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ also proves that we live in a world of linear time.

“According to St Augustine of Hippo, the Universe of going along in a straight line...if time is cyclic Jesus Christ would have to be crucified again and again. There would not be, therefore, that one perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Time had to be a straight line from the creation to the consummation to the last judgment.” (Alan Watts).

In Christianity there is a sense of a “fall from grace” - the being thrown out of paradise, to thrive in sin until Armageddon. Without linear time this belief is not possible.

Cyclical time for the Native Americans meant that there was no fall from grace as the Christians see it. They were simply created by a power higher than themselves. Yes, there were wrongdoings to be learned from, but there was no belief of a thing called 'sin', or anything equivalent to it. Since time is cyclical, there would be no need for forgiveness and improvement, since they did not believe they were progressing, eventually to the enlightenment, and judgment of their God over them. Their 'myths', or stories of how things have to pass were delivered orally, and not in a scripture as the Bible is. The Native American way of life did not look upon time as a force rushing past them on and on until eventually the end of their existence was terminated.

The sense of society and way of living was different between these two cultures, also. The English were people that valued improvement. Knowing that time was passing by, they strove to create new solutions, gain knowledge, build things bigger and better before... to become better people individually. They owned their own land, houses, and money. If another human wished to have something they did, they would have to buy or trade for it; it was not generously given. Each generation was expected to do better than the last. Knowing that with each passing year knowledge was to be gained raised the bar for ever new generation. Learn more than the next, and you will acquire more money, and more knowledge, and then pass that on to your children.

Native Americans did not think so selfishly: they shared their food and land as form of commonwealth; 'this is not anyone's land, it is everyone's land.' They did not have such a strong form of individuality, but a sense of community. They lived and thrived off the land, thus being incredibly close to nature and its animals. They believed that all animals were on the same level as themselves, and to disrespect a creature was a bad thing to do, and

would upset the gods. A French missionary once described the behavior of the Innu tribe : “the Savages do not throw to the dogs bones of female Beavers and Porcupines, - at least, certain specified bones, in short, they are very careful that the dogs do not eat any bones of birds and of other animals which are taken in the net, otherwise they will take no more except with incomparable difficulties ... it is remarkable how they gather and collect these bones, and preserve them with so much care, that you would say their game would be lost if they violated their superstitions.”

The English Christians view of time affected them so that they strove to excel; to gain more knowledge and wealth. They believed in time as a straight line which would continue onward forever. The Native American view of cyclical time created an environment of a close community, dwelling with and around the earth and creatures. They believed they did not need to change or improve their way of living, because life was a cycle, and this was the way they would be, forever onward. These two societies are more different than they are the same, yet they are both brought together through religion.