

# ANTHROPOLOGY, NIHILISM, FUNDAMENTAL CHRISTIANITY

## And Their Impact On The Chumash Indians

Commentary

Dr. John M. Anderson

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I maintain many webpages on the Chumash Indians, who were the largest cultural group in California prior to the invasions of Europeans into the region. One of these webpages provides commentary on the rapid development of the California Spaceport, on the western lands of the ancient Chumash Indians. This spaceport is located west of Santa Barbara, near a remote Indian religious shrine called Point Conception.

One of my webpages features commentary on an emotional anthropological debate that is featured in the international journal called *Current Anthropology*. In a review, I described a controversial article being discussed in the debate as "filled with academic jargon influenced by post-modern anthropological nihilism." This assessment generated a considerable amount of mail, mostly from web users asking me to elaborate on the topic of academic *nihilism*. Among the respondents was one of the authors of this article who assured me that, like myself, he was opposed to nihilism in modern anthropology.

The purpose of this webpage is therefore to provide a brief overview of the *nihilism* debate in contemporary anthropology, with a focus on the field of Chumash Studies. The 1997 Supreme Court ruling against the Religious Freedom Restoration Act enters into discussion, as does the long-standing religious intolerance shown by fundamental Christians against native Traditional spirituality.

*Lost? Can't figure how you found yourself in a discussion of nihilism, when you wanted to know more about environmental impacts of spaceports?*

Try: 'The Moon, Mars, and Chumash Traditionalism' (Anderson) for a discussion of the spaceport at Vandenberg.

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## **ANTHROPOLOGICAL NIHILISM ON THE WEB**

My webpage commentary on the presence of nihilism in contemporary anthropology was not drawn out of the air. It was meant, rather, to invite readers interested in Chumash Indians to explore an already rich international dialogue on the widely recognized 'problem' of anthropological nihilism.

A large number of websites address related topics, and readers can locate them by searching for the keywords "anthropology" "post-modern" "Pomo" and "nihilism." You will find tens of thousands of citations. And if you want to jump into one of the many anthropological overviews on the subject, I would suggest "Postmodernism and Its Critics" by S. Weiss and K. Wesley as a good place to start. See [Weiss/Wesley](#) (and look at their webpage called "Criticisms" for an interesting overview).

## **NIHILISM AND CALIFORNIA ANTHROPOLOGY**

After a day or two of reading on this serious and often disconcerting topic, you might need some relief. Try the website called, [Postmodern Humor](#) by Professor Katz (Trent University, Canada). But no matter how often those of us interested in Chumash Studies try to break the tension with self-deprecating laughter, the topic of anthropological *nihilism* always remains before us as a sobering topic.

If you open a typical dictionary, it will define *nihilism* as the denial of the existence of any basis for knowledge (or truth). This is the sense in which I used the term *nihilism* in my writings. Anthropologists who consider themselves postmodernists often criticize modernist colleagues for expressing nihilistic attitudes.

The term *nihilism* can also be used to imply rejection of custom, but this is NOT the connotation that I wished to convey. In fact, it is my contention that the negative impacts on the California Indians from nihilistic attitudes stems from the long-standing practice of American social scientists. Many who consider themselves Modernists (advocates of objectivity in the social sciences) have denigrated native Californians for deviating from the dominant Euro-Christian mainstream customs.

But the current debate over nihilism in anthropology is only secondarily focused on religious intolerance and ethnocentrism among self-proclaimed 'objective' social scientists. A growing concern is the philosophical nihilism among some professors in our graduate schools, whose cynicism towards ethics has influenced some of their graduates to take high paying jobs for developers and construct their findings according to the needs of their employers. Let us take the worst possible example, in the context of the Chumash Traditionalists who might chose to challenge the fabulously rich coalition promoting the development of a commercial spaceport near Point Conception. This coalition, like other development interests, needs to comply with state and federal laws regulating development. One aspect of these laws is the protection of historical sites, including those of native Americans. A truly nihilistic social scientist, lacking any deep-seated convictions about truth, might be tempted to shade his or her findings to comply with the economic/political interests of the developer. As a result, economic self-interest (what Kitsepawit refers to as "greed") may taint the assessment.

I am not saying that greed influenced the researchers working for the Spaceport when they decided to release their divisive article on the Chumash and Point Conception. I do not know their motives, or the specifics of their relations with the Air Force, the commercial aerospace industry, or the pro-growth political coalition backing the California Spaceport. But I do believe that they made a mistake in releasing this particular article, with its findings against protecting the greater Point Conception area (and its extensive critique of Chumash Traditionalism) at a time when spaceport activities were intruding on the Point Conception region.

The non-reservation Chumash, especially those who consider themselves Traditionalists, were already generally distrustful of scholars hired to write salvage archaeology reports. The Traditionalists discredited many of their reports as overemphasizing material culture, and blamed government agencies for failing to address controversial historical issues dealing with the California Holocaust.

Regardless of the author's motivations in the *Current Anthropology* article, its publication gave some Chumash Traditionalists the impression of accommodation to special interests. The author's questioning of Chumash Traditionalism understandably caused much concern among the numerous Chumash bands, distracting them with issues of authenticity of membership just at the time that they needed to unite in common cause if they want to make an effective case against the Spaceport.

## **NIHILISM, GREED, AND CHUMASH PHILOSOPHY**

In *The Chumash House of Fate* (Anderson 1997) I address the problem of greed in Chumash ethics: "Chumash theologians believed in free will. This did not mean that they considered themselves independent of the struggles of the gods. Rather they felt that they had personal and social responsibility for deciding which of the gods to seek help from at any given time.

Kitsepawit, a Chumash islander, explained this situation to John Harrington, an ethnographer from the Smithsonian Institution. Traditional theologians taught Kitsepawit to believe that greed ruled the world. Harrington's field notes do not explain exactly what Kitsepawit meant by 'world.' But from other cosmological data we can guess that the power of greed was not active in the highest heavens and was manifested only in the lower levels of the cosmos such as in the 'world' occupied by humans.

Like other educated Chumash, Kitsepawit apparently believed that he had free will but was constantly suffering from the effects of selfishness. By himself, an individual human could never expect to escape suffering in the moral chaos around him. So he beseeched the gods to aid him in his struggles. He prayed for assistance, in a world overwhelmed with disease, death, and pain.

The Spanish and Mexican priests who ran the Chumash 'missions' (production centers) routinely sent reports to Mexico City condemning leaders of traditional families for supposedly practicing black magic. Chumash traditionalists considered such accusations to be both bizarre and ruthless, because they implied that the native Californians were guilty of seeking alliances with the demons of the Lower World (whom the Christians believed to be led by Satan). Such an alliance with the ruling powers of the lower world made no sense to the traditionalists who were trained to *balance* the powers of the upper and lower worlds" (page 10). See [House of Fate](#) for further discussion.

## ETHICAL NIHILISM

Ethical *nihilism* is the belief that there is no meaning or purpose in existence. Clearly, this is not the focus of my commentary. I believe that there is meaning in existence; I presume to most American anthropologist believe the same; and I am certain that Traditional Chumash believed in such (existential) meaning.

Ethical nihilism can lead an anthropologist, or any other social scientist, to reject what I consider basic ethical responsibilities to the peoples being studied. Lacking a deep-seated commitment to any mitigating professional ethical standards, ethical nihilists may be constantly tempted to sell their M.A. and Ph.D. credentials to the highest bidder.

## POLITICAL NIHILISM

Political *nihilism* is generally associated with violent revolutionary movements, typically associated with terrorism. Clearly, this is not the focus of my commentary.

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## Retrospective

This web page was drafted in 1998, in response to a rush of correspondences generated by the publication of Brian Haley and Larry Wilcoxon's article in *Current Anthropology*.

Since I wrote my first web page on the Spaceport controversy Brian Haley and I exchanged a number of emails. these were very helpful in better educating me on his perspective. In the emails, Haley objected to any implication that he embraced nihilism in any form. In fact he indicated that he is opposed to nihilistic tendencies in anthropology.

Unfortunately, rejection of nihilism does not necessarily lead to agreement on other matters. If I understand the situation correctly, the anthropological split[ described by Haley and Wilcoxon in their 1998 article] has not been healed in the many months that have gone by since publication. There is a strong need for including sociologists, linguists, philosophers, historians, musicologists, and other scholars in the debate, as well as many more Chumash voices.

Chumash Traditionalists, especially those from non-reservation families who represent the majority of Chumash, still distrust academics working for government and private development interests. There is much work to be done, to rebuild trust and it is my contention that the fundamental step to healing is federal recognition and a land base for the Chumash groups living outside of the Santa Ynez valley.

The second step is for government and private interests to cooperate with Chumash Traditionalists when they ask for frank discussion of Spanish, Mexican, and American genocide in public history projects. The era of describing material culture on road signs and other public displays, and avoiding the harsh realities of the California Holocaust, should be ended.

(John Anderson, April 2000)

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## Mike Khus Review

2000

April 23, 2000: "I have read your web-page and have found it to be a straightforward and painfully detailed explanation of some the issues associated with the divisive article published the in the magazine, *Current Anthropology*.

I believe that anyone who reads this webpage can gain a better understanding of the problems which plague not only contemporary Chumash who struggle to preserve their sacred religious sites from destructive development and unscrupulous "professional" anthropologists, but might also gain some degree of familiarity with the complex, internal debate among members of the anthropological community itself.

This debate is not merely about who anthropologists work for and whose political-economic interests they uphold. This debate reflects the broader issue of whether anthropology as practiced today, is capable of scientific objectivity on the level of other disciplines such as theoretical physics (it clearly is not) or whether it is merely an "interpretive art", and is therefore not reliable or authoritative for purposes of public policy.

Some anthropologists have a vested economic interest in preserving an image of scientific objectivity. They engage in unethical attacks and censorship upon those within their own community who might question this image. Neither have they flinched from making it their business to meddle in the internal affairs of the Chumash community, deliberately targeting those Chumash families & individuals who challenge these same anthropologists when sacred religious sites are threatened by the latter's irresponsible actions.

Some of these anthropologists wish to undermine the status of Chumash people themselves by claiming to be the "gatekeepers" of Chumash identity- literally, to say who is Chumash and who is not. By controlling membership of the Chumash community, they wish to regulate what contemporary Chumash might say and do. I know of no other ethnic group in the United States whose fundamental right of self-determination and identity is under similar attack, and I doubt that any other group would tolerate such an offensive and arrogant assault by so-called "experts".

This outrageous attempt to control the Chumash community, flies in the face of every legal precedent and federal administrative interpretation of Indian law that I can think of. The old policies of termination and assimilation have been repudiated. Now a faction of anthropologists would have us step backwards, and have us all believe that like the Indian agents of the wild west, that they alone "know what is best for those savages" and therefore, we should permit them to control the destinies of California Indian peoples.

We California Indian peoples whose treaties were never ratified nor honored, whose ancestors were left homeless and without means of self-support and ruthlessly hunted down by American death squads (the infamous "state militias") in an ethnic cleansing campaign of extermination, whose numbers were reduced by an incredible 90% (a higher mortality than suffered by European Jews of WWII), suffering indescribable emotional and psychological damage not to mention severe social disorientation when our cultures were decimated, deserve justice. As Dr. Martin L. King once said: "Justice delayed is justice denied".

When is the anthropological community going to ever develop a sense of justice and fairness and recognize the part which they can now, albeit belatedly, play in securing such justice for

the surviving remnants of the California Holocaust ? Do they covet their privileged academic careers so much that they close their minds and yes, their hearts too, to what any decent American can plainly see? I think that the American public wishes to see justice for California Indians, because I have faith in the basic goodness of all people.

So, I appreciate your work in providing the internet-literate public the opportunity to learn and to gain a more complete understanding of important issues that face our Chumash community. Thank you"

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