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**Ecology as Religion:
Faith in Place of Fact**

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INTRODUCTION

The environment has become a political issue of enormous importance. The agenda of 1992's "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro demonstrated how ecological crusaders captured, if only momentarily, almost the entire world's attention.

The issue has particular political potency in the U.S. In 1988 George Bush promised to be the "environmental president" if elected. Two years later he signed the nearly 800 page Clean Air Act—20 times the length of the original law--despite warnings that it would provide little ecological protection at enormous cost. Nevertheless, he was sharply criticized for his alleged lack of attention to the environment, and the new administration includes Al Gore, who has built his career on apocalyptic predictions of environmental doom, as Vice President.

Widespread public concern about conservation is understandable since no one wants to wake up to air that is unbreathable and water that is undrinkable. Yet the current debate, including proposals for ever more draconian "solutions," has taken on a tone that often seems frankly religious.

The problem is not that religion, particularly Christianity, has nothing to say about conservation. To the contrary, the Bible emphasizes that the earth is God's creation and man is but a steward of its resources. Nevertheless, humans hold a unique place in the created order and were explicitly given authority to use the earth, the so-called Dominion Covenant. The struggle for Christians, then, is to find the right balance between protection of the animals, plants, and lands that God called good, and their use in order to benefit the people made in the image of God.

Unfortunately, the new environmental spirituality has taken a quite different direction, moving beyond the broad concern for stewardship and towards a very partisan stance on specific issues—all in the name of Christian theology. In part, the new eco-spirituality reflects the latest fashion in liberal religious circles. Churches that have long emphasized the "social gospel" are now recycling products, substituting china for plastic dishes, composting plants, installing solar power, cleaning up creeks, surveying energy consumers, serving meatless meals, and praying for endangered animal species. They are also lobbying public officials: "Church Leaders Seize Global Warming Issue," ran a recent headline in the *Washington Post*.¹ "This is a spiritual issue, not just a technical problem. It's a matter of God's creation under assault," explained the Rev. Bruce McLeod, president of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC). At a meeting of the CCC and the National Council of Churches, clerics endorsed the World Climate Convention regarding CO₂ emissions, then under negotiation for presentation at the Rio Conference. "As church leaders, we ourselves have been slow to recognize the seriousness of the global warming problem. We now clearly see it as both

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an issue of spirituality and justice,” said a statement released by the two organizations.

Indeed, a variety of religious environmental organizations have been forming—the North American Coalition on Religion and Ecology (NACRE), Religion and Science for the Environment, and the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force, for instance. In early 1992 Sen. Gore worked with agnostic scientist Carl Sagan and what Gore’s office described as “leaders of every major denomination and faith group in the United States” to organize the Mission to Washington: Religion and Science in Partnership for the Environment in order to press Congress and the White House for “bold new action to protect the global environment, and to help ensure the success of the Earth Summit.”² And concern for the environment is not just opening up a new lobbying front for mainline churches that have already been delving into a host of other political controversies. It is also spilling over into program and worship, liturgy and theology.

Combined with the activism of established denominations is a growing quasi-paganistic movement in which environmentalism itself seems to have become a competing religion.

For instance, back in 1979, in New York, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine issued a “program for environment” entitled *City & Planet*. Among the program activities was a sermon by James Lovelock explaining his Gaia Hypothesis, that the earth should be treated as a living being. The Cathedral hosted a book party for him.³ The Cathedral remains in the forefront of environmental activities. Paul Gorman manages Religion and Science for the Environment, an interfaith religious organization at the Cathedral, and explains that “This is not just religious people finding yet another social issue, but rather religious people experiencing a very profound challenge to faith and to what it means to be religious.”⁴ Other churches have also long taken an interest in environmental affairs and we are now seeing a steadily increasing greening of the churches. In 1990 NACRE held an Intercontinental Conference on Caring for Creation at which Bahai, Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic texts were read along with Christian and Jewish ones. Native Americans presented a program on “healing the Wounded Earth” and Carl Sagan gave a major address. The organization also prepared a Liturgy for “Mother Earth.”

But the new eco-religion has moved beyond the traditional religious realm. Combined with the activism of established denominations is a growing quasi-paganistic movement in which environmentalism itself seems to have become a competing religion and the earth has replaced God as an object of worship. The new pantheism takes many forms: witchcraft, goddess worship, the occult, traditional pantheism, and Deep Ecology. Although these variants differ sharply in many details, all reflect a tendency to treat the earth as sacred and minimize the importance of human beings. At the fringe, some eco-pagans believe in the use of violence to both protect and worship the earth.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Most citizens who have indicated a concern for the environment have done so for understandable, even laudable, reasons. Few have a larger, spiritual agenda. But like most movements, environmentalism's most fervent activists and organizational leaders are more radical than their supporters. Many of the former want to slow growth not because they think it is necessary to, for instance, preserve good air quality, but because they believe it to be a moral duty. As a result, factual questions about the nature of our environmental problems and the efficacy of the proposed solutions become irrelevant, since the means—several variants of coerced asceticism--become the ends.

Consider Jeremy Rifkin, who cites a variety of supposedly looming environmental disasters in making his pitch for a new "biospheric consciousness." There is, however, a philosophical undercurrent to his work that suggests he would demand radical cuts in consumption for the purposes of "environmental stewardship and economic equity" even if it were proved that we faced no ecological problems.⁵ Further, he wants to end meat consumption not only as a means of "saving the planet," but also as "an acknowledgment of our kindred spirit with the rest of the animal kingdom and our empathetic regard for the intrinsic value of all of earth's creatures."⁶ Nor is he alone. When asked about the possibility of cold fusion providing an inexpensive, virtually limitless energy source, Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich, the perennially apocalyptic critic of population growth, whose predictions have proved to be consistently incorrect, stated that it would be "like giving a machine gun to an idiot child."⁷

This semi-religious commitment to certain ecological outcomes drives much of environmental policy today. The Clean Air Act makes little trade-off between huge economic costs and minor health effects. Environmental groups that produce oil and natural gas on their own properties lobby against even controlled and limited drilling on federal land. Although African countries, such as Zimbabwe, which allow a market for ivory, have better protected their elephant herds than those, such as Kenya, which prohibit ivory sales, the conservation movement pressed for and won an international ban on the ivory trade. In all of these cases and more, hidden philosophical, even religious, tenets have skewed policy, causing public officials to pursue strategies that deliver less environmental protection at greater expense.

ECOPAGANISM: CHRISTIAN SYNCRETISM

A significant amount of today's religious fervor for the environment is coming from established denominations, particularly Christian ones. Much of what the churches are doing in the practical and political realm can be faulted for being based on poor information and for failing to achieve their purported ends. For instance, the statement adopted by the Canadian and National Councils of Churches earlier this year on global warming claimed

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that an “international scientific consensus” existed on the role of CO₂ emissions and rising temperatures.⁸ In fact, there is great disagreement on what, if any, impact human-induced CO₂ increases have had on temperatures over the past century.⁹

But of greater interest to believers should be the theological contamination posed by much of conservation ethic being pushed by a number of environmental activists, many of whom believe that Judaism and Christianity are responsible for the disastrous plight of the earth today. Criticisms of Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, have often been tied to specific theological doctrines, most obviously birth control and abortion. For instance, advocates of reduced population growth routinely single out the Catholic church for its opposition to contraception.

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Attacks on traditional faiths run far deeper than just one teaching, however. Argues environmentalist Lynn White, “Since the roots of our [environmental] trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.”¹⁰ White, a professor of history at the University of California, delivered a speech at the American Association for the Advancement of Science back in 1966 in which he termed Christianity “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.”¹¹ The impact of Christianity was particularly pernicious, in his view, since Christianity replaced paganism, destroying prior belief systems that considered nature to be imbued with a sense of the sacred. “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”¹² White’s charges have been echoed by Donald Rowster, author of *Nature’s Economy*, a history of the science of ecology. “The good shepherd, the heroic benefactor of man, has almost never been concerned with leading his flock to a broad reverence for life. His pastoral duties have been limited to ensuring the welfare of his human charges, often in the face of a nature that has been seen as corrupt and predatory.”¹³

Although other faiths, like Confucianism, Shintoism, and the beliefs of Native Americans, are as man-centered or environmentally destructive as Christianity, White’s thesis remains popular. Author Joseph Wood Krutch blamed the early Israelites for desanctifying nature. The reason, he observes, “perhaps was, not any impulse toward cruelty, but simply that the new monotheism was aware how easily deep concern with animals leads to animal gods and to polytheism.”¹⁴ Historian Arnold Toynbee also criticizes the rise of monotheism through Judaism which, “removed the age-old restraint that was once placed on man’s greed by his awe. Man’s greedy impulse to exploit nature used to be held in check by his pious worship of nature.”¹⁵

Animal rights activist Tom Regan attacks “speciesism” as being “responsible for an incalculable amount of evil.” And the culprit is clear: “It is an arrogant, unbridled anthropocentrism, often aided and abetted in our history by an arrogant, unbridled Christian theology ... that has brought the earth to the brink of ecological disaster.”¹⁶ Rupert Sheldrake criticizes “the

Judeo-Christian tradition” for having “always emphasized the supremacy of the male God,” in contrast to mother earth.¹⁷ He goes on to call for new forms of theology, “a new renaissance” in which we “acknowledge the animistic traditions of our ancestors.”¹⁸

Jeremy Rifkin and Ted Howard argue that “the traditional Christian approach to nature had been a major contributing factor to ecological destruction.” Their criticism is two-fold: Christianity emphasizes “otherworldliness,” leading to “disregard and even exploitation of the physical world” and “the concept of *dominion* has been used by people to justify the ruthless manipulation and exploitation of nature.”¹⁹ They go on to call for “a radical reformulation of Christian theology” that incorporates aspects of Eastern religions.²⁰

Some within the Christian and Jewish tradition have advanced similar attacks. Lewis Regenstein, Director of the Interfaith Council for the Protection of Animals and Nature, argues that “there is little doubt that Christian theology is partly to blame for the churches’ apathy, for some aspects of it have traditionally regarded this world as something less than a place to be desired or affirmed.”²¹

Two self-professed Christian theists, Herman Daly and John Cobb, contend that “Christian theism has done much to bring about the dangerous situation to which the world has come. In varied forms it has supported anthropocentrism, ignored or belittled the natural world, opposed efforts to stop population growth, directed attention away from the urgent needs of this life, treated as of absolute authority for today teachings that were meant to influence a very different world, aroused false hopes, given false assurances, and claimed God’s authority for all of these sins.”²²

James Nash, Executive Director of the Churches’ Center for Theology and Public Policy, writes that “without doubt, Christian traditions bear some responsibility for propagating” destructive environmental perspectives. “Consequently, the ecological crisis is a challenge to Christians to eradicate the last vestiges of these ecologically ruinous myths,” he adds. Indeed, “for the Christian churches,” he says, “the ecological crisis is more than a biophysical challenge. It is also a theological-ethical challenge.”²³ He, too, talks of a new theological reformation, but a more moderate one than that envisioned by Rifkin and Howard:

In a sense, the church does need “new” theological and ethical bases for sustaining ecological integrity. This need, however, does not entail abandoning or replacing Christianity’s main themes. Rather, it requires extensions and reinterpretations of these main themes in ways that preserve their historic identity and that are also consistent with ecological data.²⁴

Less concerned about the main themes of Christianity, however, is Dominican priest Matthew Fox, who decries the “onslaught of

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anthropocentric...culture that began with the breakup of cosmology at the end of the Middle Ages.”²⁵ Fox, once silenced by the Vatican for what Cardinal Ratzinger called “dangerous and deviant” teachings,²⁶ goes on to argue that “the dominant religious soil in which the West has planted Christianity is in great part exhausted.” What is needed, then, he argues, is a new creation spirituality, which “has to do with the salvation, the healing of the planet and our peoples before it is too late.”²⁷

Stranger still is Catharina Halkes’ call for Christian eco-feminism. Halkes, Emeritus Professor of Feminist Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands, agrees that traditional Christian theology bears some responsibility for our current environmental problems. She therefore advocates refashioning fundamental Christian doctrines. Writes Halkes: “the image of the world as the body of God belongs more to our time and is closer to our changing reality than that of the Kingdom of God.”²⁸

Nor is it enough in the view of some for the church to be involved environmentally. Even activist churches have been criticized for the way in which they have engaged environmental issues. Writes Jay McDaniel, Director of the Steel Center for the Study of Religion and Philosophy: “There has continued to be an anthropocentric focus in the church’s concern for the environment. It is the environment of human beings that is considered, and it is considered chiefly because it is indispensable for human life. Features of the environment that are not important for human beings are still neglected.”²⁹

ECOLOGY AS RELIGION

Equally significant is the tendency for environmentalism to become, for many, the new paganism, a competing religion in its own right, with a mixture of traditional pantheism and more modern forms of earth worship. Of course, the rise of Christianity never ended paganism. Wiccans, the “good” witches, have a tradition running back to pre-Christian Europe. “Witchcraft,” writes Starhawk, a priestess of the Old Religion of the Goddess (as well as an instructor at Matthew Fox’s Institute for Culture and Creation), is “perhaps the oldest religion existent in the West.” And it has a heavy ecological emphasis. Adds Starhawk, “witchcraft takes its teachings from nature, and reads inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the flight of birds, the slow growth of trees, and the cycles of the seasons.”³⁰

Nor was pantheism unknown among environmentalists in the past. Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term ecology in 1866, was a pantheist who published through the Rationalist Press Association and had an influential readership. Though religious as a student, he ultimately attacked Christianity for placing man above other creatures, leading “to a regrettable contempt of all other organisms.”³¹ Observes historian John Young, “the extraordinary influence of Haeckel and his successors can be attributed, in part, to the quasi-

religious appeal, the incipient pantheism of his picture. But there is a deeper appeal; the return to a god-impregnated nature, which had been banished from the North by Christianity.”³²

Increasing environmental consciousness has joined with New Age thinking, resulting in a vibrant Neo-Pagan movement. Neo-Paganism has been estimated to have up to 200,000 adherents, described by the *Utne Reader* as “a diverse lot: Included are spiritual feminists, radical environmentalists, ethnic and racial minority group members, gay males and lesbians, and others who have often been pushed aside by the major Eastern and Western religions.”³³ Near San Francisco, neo-pagans have established the Bay Area Pagan Assemblies to battle Christians resisting New Age practices. Moreover, the Unitarian Church has established an official “Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans” with more than 60 chapters in the U.S. The Rev. Lesly Phillips explains that “the growing awareness of the urgent need to honor and heal Mother Earth, have [sic] drawn many Unitarian Universalists to a contemporary Pagan approach to religion.”³⁴

Indeed, we are seeing increasing numbers of people engaging in Goddess worship, literally worshipping the earth. Some groups have priestesses who pray to the earth: “Sacred Earth Power, bring healing to Planet Earth,” intoned Selena Fox of the Circle Sanctuary on Earth Day 1991.³⁵ Elinor Gadon argues in her book, *The Once and Future Goddess*, that “we are doomed as a species and planet unless we have a radical change of consciousness. The reemergence of the Goddess is becoming the symbol and metaphor for this transformation.”³⁶

Margot Adler, a witch who serves on the Unitarian Covenant board, explains that “Most Neo-Pagans sense an aliveness and ‘presence’ in nature. They are usually polytheists, or animists, or pantheists, or two or three of these things at once.”³⁷ Starhawk summarizes the movement:

Common to all are the belief in the sacredness of the Earth and interconnected systems that sustain life; the focus on ritual, on ecstatic experience and lived ethics rather than dogma; the heritage of persecution and resistance to oppression; the stress on spirituality as communal healing rather than on personal salvation or enlightenment; [and] the rich symbolism rooted in the cycles of birth, growth, death, and regeneration in nature and human life.³⁸

Another religious strand is the so-called Gaia hypothesis, popularized by former NASA staffer James Lovelock. Lovelock contends that the earth is essentially alive, an argument previously advanced by geologist James Hutton in 1785. In Lovelock’s view, because the biosphere has responded to outside changes, such as the temperature of the sun, and maintained a general equilibrium, the world has shown a capacity for adjustment beyond the mere sum of its parts. “The system seemed to exhibit the behavior of a single organism, even a living creature.”³⁹ Humans are not important because individual species are of little consequence to the larger earth.

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Exactly what Lovelock thinks this means in practice is unclear. On the one hand, he declares that “In no way do I see Gaia as a sentient being, a surrogate God. To me, Gaia is alive and part of the ineffable universe, and I am part of her.” But he has gone further, asking: “What is Mary but another name for Gaia? Then her capacity for virgin birth is no miracle. She is ... conceivably a part of God. On earth she is the source of life everlasting and is alive now. She gave birth to humankind and we are part of her.”

Historian Young compares Lovelock’s theories to those of Fox. Lovelock never mentions Christ, but he does seem to see mankind in roughly the same way--as part of creation rather than a special creation of God--as does Fox. Says the latter, “Creation is all things and us. It is us in relationship with all things.”⁴⁰ Gaia language has also influenced the wider environmental community. In its report, the World Commission on Environment and Development observed that “from space, we can see and study the Earth as an organism whose health depends on the health of all its parts.”⁴¹

A different and radical form of spirituality is offered by Rifkin and Howard. They envision a world of permanent energy scarcity and environmental risk and the end of the industrial age, something which can be coped with only through a “radical change in world view” that “will have to be accomplished in a very short period of time. To succeed will require zealous determination--a militancy, if you will--of herculean proportions.”⁴² The vision they proffer not only has roots in various religious traditions, as they argue, but is spiritual. For instance, Rifkin and Howard declare that “in a low-entropy society work becomes an essential component in our efforts to reach an enlightened state of consciousness.” Further, they argue, “human labor is sanctified as any activity that helps us ‘know who we really are’.”⁴³ Their theology is essentially that of asceticism. They write:

The governing ethical principle of a low-entropy world view is to minimize energy flow. Excessive material wealth is recognized as an irreversible diminution of the world’s precious resources. In the low-entropy society “less is more” becomes not a throwaway phrase but a truth of the highest magnitude. A low-entropy society deemphasizes material consumption. Frugality becomes the watchword. Human needs are met, but whimsical, self-indulgent desires—the kind pandered to in every shopping center in the country—are not.⁴⁴

Rifkin’s asceticism is joined with a Medieval communalism. For instance, he seems entranced by the lack of privacy and modesty in the “premodern era,” a time when “the well-being of the community and the expression of the common will took precedence over the needs of the individual.”⁴⁵ People rarely acted on their own, lived most of their lives, including sexual relations, in front of one another, and shared not only their homes but their beds with family, friends, and servants. Alas, Rifkin seems to believe, all of this changed. Indeed, Rifkin doesn’t even like the development of the chair, “A constant reminder of the new separation

between people” which “reinforced the idea of the autonomous individual, secure in his private space, isolated from the responsibilities and obligations of the larger community.”⁴⁶

Moreover, Rifkin would have this anti-materialist ethic coexist with a very different view of nature. “A low-entropy culture emphasizes man and woman as a part of nature, not apart from it.” Once this is understood, “an ethical base is established by which the appropriateness of all human activity can be judged.” To destroy another species, for instance, would therefore be immoral: “Every species must be preserved simply because it has an inherent and inalienable right to life by virtue of its existence.”⁴⁷ Indeed, argues Rifkin, we need to “resacralize our relationship to” the planet.⁴⁸ Elsewhere he argues: “Biospheric consciousness embraces the entirety of the earth community. When man and woman stand erect on the earth’s surface, they become both incarnate and transcendent, their bodies reaching down to reparticipate with the flesh of the planet, their spirits reaching up to embrace heavenly rapture.”⁴⁹

But a religious reverence for nature is best epitomized by the deep ecologists. Norwegian Arne Naess coined the phrase “deep ecology” in a famous article in 1973. California philosophy professors Bill Devall and George Sessions call for the cultivation of “ecological consciousness.”⁵⁰ Among other things, they advocate “the revival of Earth-bonding rituals, celebrating specific places” and cite a Taoist ritual as an example.⁵¹

Devall and Sessions urge Christians to work within their own framework to promote environmentalism and cite St. Francis of Assisi and Giodano Bruino as Christian thinkers who provide “a source for the deep ecology perspective of organic wholeness and biocentric equality.”⁵² However, Devall and Sessions sound far more positive when they discuss Eastern religions and the Gaia hypothesis. God is never mentioned, nor how the earth was created. Atheistic in one sense, deep ecology is deeply religious in another sense, operating as a world-view with a secular substitute for God.

In fact, there are a large number of well-known conservationists who moved toward Buddhism, in particular, and transcendentalism, with highly romantic attitudes toward nature. Some, like aviator Charles Lindbergh and preservationist William Brewster, dabbled in the occult. Explains Alston Chase:

Rather than seeing human beings as at the center of the universe, these people saw humanity at best as part of an interconnected whole and at worst as the temple destroyers who desacralized nature. Nor did the Judeo-Christian view that only man partook of the sacred satisfy them. Instead they saw the sacred in even the smallest things of life.

Their names became a wilderness religion, but a religion with many names: Buddhism, Taoism, inhumanism, organicism, mysticism, transcendentalism, animism. Yet however semi-

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nal and inchoate, however eclectic a collection of offbeat non-Western and nonmodern theories, these variegated ideas did coalesce into one theme...: The view that the universe is one interconnected whole and that every atom in creation is part of the sacred being of God.⁵³

Thus, while the name, “deep ecology” is new, the concepts it represents are not. Devall’s and Sessions’ two main tenets of deep ecology, for instance, are self-realization and biocentric equality. Devall and Sessions write: “In keeping with the spiritual traditions of many of the world’s religions, the deep ecology norm of self-realization goes beyond the modern Western *self*....Spiritual growth, or unfolding, begins when we cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans from our family and friends to, eventually, our species. But the deep ecology sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world.”⁵⁴ Indeed, they add, “the intuition of biocentric equality is that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization within the larger Self-realization.”⁵⁵

Radicals such as Naess advocate “a long range humane reduction [in population] through mild but tenacious political and economic measures” in order to make room for “population growth for thousands of species which are now constrained by human pressures.”

ECO-PAGANISM’S PRACTICAL THREATS

The growth of spiritual environmentalism is having an impact on government policy and thereby on the lives of Americans, whatever their religious views. Put bluntly, the agenda of many ecopagans, in contrast to average environmentalists, is anti-human. The basic problem is *the lack of* an anthropocentric focus, and a consequent disregard for the transcendent value of every person. Warns John Young, who otherwise seems to sympathize with the extreme environmental activists:

Deep ecology, Gaia theory and creation spirituality make an attractive but heady mixture. It may prove to be a less dangerous one than anthropocentrism mixed with advanced technology, but it is a good idea to know its political flashpoint. ... The ecological idea appealed to the German Nazis because they, too, believed that the laws of nature could not be transcended by human society, and they opposed both capitalism and *laissez-faire* economics, the forerunner of today’s “economic rationalism,” from ecological principles.⁵⁶

Indeed, several leading Nazis were also committed environmentalists of various stripes: Hitler deputy Rudolph Hess, Agriculture Minister Walther Darre, and Fritz Todt of the Todt Organization. And this support had consequences. Writes Anna Bramwell: “Nazi Germany was the first country in Europe to form nature reserves....It was the first country to insist, in 1934, that new tree plantations should include broad-leaved, deciduous trees, as well as conifers....Anti-vivisection laws were passed....Land with trees on it was seen as sacrosanct.”⁵⁷ For all of their obvious concern for nature, however, the Nazis obviously did not exhibit a similar love for mankind.

Some modern philosophers, while certainly not Nazis, also let their ecological vision diminish the significance of human life. Argues psychologist Neil Daniels, “nature does not seem to demonstrate that human life is precious.”⁵⁸ Indeed, some deep ecologists today are willing to resort to violence. Dave Foreman, co-founder of EarthFirst! and a one-time Goldwater Republican, and recently accused of conspiring to down power pylons for an Arizona nuclear plant, considers the Earth to be a living organism and explains that eco-terrorism, violent and illegal acts ranging from disabling building equipment to placing spikes in roads and trees, is “a form of worship toward the earth. It’s really a very spiritual thing to go out and do.”⁵⁹ He has also advocated allowing the poor in Third World countries to starve, “to just let nature seek its own balance,” and can’t seem to understand why people think his opinion to be “monstrous.”⁶⁰

Others, like Naess, advocate “a long range humane reduction [in population] through mild but tenacious political and economic measures” in order to make room for “population growth for thousands of species which are now constrained by human pressures.”⁶¹ Naess, who wants to bring the population down to about one billion, the population in 1800, does not, apparently, believe in violence, having authored studies on Ghandi. The problem, of course, would occur when Naess realized that nothing other than coercion will radically downsize the earth’s population. That potential dilemma obviously posed no difficulty to one letter writer to the newsletter, *EarthFirst!*, who suggested using biological agents to reduce humankind while leaving unharmed other forms of life.⁶²

Even non-violent ecopaganism is not harmless. Treating the environment in religious terms has proved to be a particularly effective way to indoctrinate children with a highly partisan world view. In her book, *Under the Spell of Mother Earth*, Berit Kjos reviews a number of disturbing incidents where neo-paganistic practices have been brought into the classroom. The efforts are usually subtle and are never labeled for what they are. Observes Kjos, an evangelical Christian, “the ban on religion in public schools failed to block the promotion of pagan beliefs. Spiritual buzzwords like *reverence*--suggesting a response reserved for the Creator Himself, and *connectedness*--referring to pantheistic oneness rather than biological interdependence, flow through environmental teaching and songs, persuading our children to love Mother Earth instead of God our Father.”⁶³ What amounts to political indoctrination in the name of the earth should be no less offensive to parents who are not religious.

Moreover, eco-spirituality has, as noted earlier, deformed the policy debate over conservation. Most Americans believe in striking a balance between environmental protection and economic growth: they desire clean air and water, but want to achieve those results through the most economical and efficient means possible. Unfortunately, this is not the kind of policy that the system is delivering.

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For the most influential activists, environmentalism reflects more theological discourse than policy debate.

It is very difficult to objectively examine the desirability of recycling because so many people's commitment to the process is essentially religious.

First, officials across the political spectrum, and across national boundaries, have proved disturbingly susceptible to apocalyptic scaremongering by those who are either ideologically or theologically predisposed to believe that the end of the world is nigh. Although the issues are complicated, there is substantial reason to believe that the threats posed by acid rain, the greenhouse effect, and ozone depletion are much less than commonly supposed.⁶⁴

Moreover, current government environmental policy, even when responding to genuine problems, is incredibly costly, grotesquely inefficient, and highly politicized.⁶⁵ In contrast, there are many market-oriented mechanisms that could deliver better ecological protection for less. Privatization, pollution taxes, permit trading, and market pricing, for instance, are among the strategies that have been advanced by numerous analysts over the years.⁶⁶

Yet most lobbyists and policymakers consciously ignore the myriad opportunities to improve environmental regulation. Observes Brookings Institution scholar Robert Crandall:

The inefficiencies in most federal environmental programs are well known as the result of decades of research. But most environmentalists and their supporters in Congress appear uninterested in redesigning these programs. The new Clean Air Act looks distressingly like the old one--with the exception of the acid-rain program. The results from years of research into market-based approaches to solving environmental problems have generally been ignored. We continue to spend far too much for the environmental results we obtain.⁶⁷

Why is this? One reason, presumably, is simple ignorance. But another is that for the most influential activists environmentalism reflects more theological discourse rather than policy debate. The cost of particular policies is seen as irrelevant since the course of action is *morally* required. According to this line of reasoning, it is simply obscene to put a value on elephants, even if doing so, by creating a viable market for ivory, would increase the number of elephants in the long-run. Moreover, costly policies may be seen as punishment, a "desire to purge ourselves of guilt for succeeding too well in taming nature and in generating economic well-being," in Crandall's words.⁶⁸

These factors help explain the widespread enthusiasm for recycling. In fact, much recycling is environmentally wasteful as well as economically inefficient. Polystyrene hamburger clamshells use less energy and generate less air and water pollution to produce. Aseptic packaging requires less energy to manufacture, fill, and transport. Recycling newspaper generates toxic sludge. And so on. Yet it is very difficult to objectively examine the desirability of recycling because so many people's commitment to the process is essentially religious.⁶⁹

Such a perspective is as entitled as any other to join the battle in the political arena, but the new eco-pagans have generally kept their radical agenda hidden from the public. Their all-too-effective Trojan Horse is moderate rhetoric focusing on health and safety; once they've breached Congress' walls they pour forth, pushing for policies that run far beyond their publicly professed objectives. This pattern repeated itself in the most recent debate on extending the Clean Air Act.

ECO-PAGANISM'S SPIRITUAL THREATS

The new religious environmentalism poses a more esoteric, but still serious, problem. Those who take their religious faith seriously must recognize that neo-paganism or deep ecology--essentially spiritual environmentalism, whether or not God is officially mentioned--is a separate, hostile faith that threatens to infiltrate Jewish and Christian practice and theology. Indeed, this is a goal of some. Biochemist Rupert Sheldrake admits to once viewing "Christianity, like all religion, as essentially superstitious." Today, however, he sees as "a strength of Christianity that it is grounded in an animistic experience of nature and incorporates archaic mythic themes."⁷⁰ He goes on to urge prayer that "a new harmony develops between humanity and the living world" and lauds the fact that "Within the Christian churches, the rediscovery of God of the living world is currently taking place in several ways. One is through a revival of the animistic traditions that prevailed until the Protestant Reformation and the growth of the mechanistic theory of nature."⁷¹

Others with more of a Christian gloss would infuse Christianity with pantheism or similar views. Matthew Fox appears to promote a form of monism, which denies the separation of creator and creation, veering toward Hinduism. In *Christianity Today*, Robert Brow suggests that Fox is neither a pantheist (believing that everything is God) nor an absolute monist (believing that God is the world's ultimate reality with which one wants to merge), but a modified monist: "This world view understands God as the *soul* of the world. God is part of our world but also relates *to* the world, much as we feel our own personality is in some sense distinguishable from our body. The organs of the body may feel with and react to what the person experiences, but there is hardly a personal dialogue. It is a far cry from the Christian view of a Father who wants and allows a relationship with his children."⁷²

Then there are religious environmentalists, or environmental Christians, who would stretch but, in their view, not break traditional orthodoxy while making Christian theology and churches a bit greener. For instance, Ian Bradley, a minister in the Church of Scotland and a member of the Green Party, contends that "the Christian faith is intrinsically Green, that the good news of the Gospel promises liberation and fulfillment for the whole of creation and that Christians have a positive and distinctive contribution to make to the salvation of our threatened planet and the preservation of the

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natural environment.”⁷³ He says that he argues not for “new doctrines or new theology” but instead to simply “return with a new eye and new attention to the Scriptures.”⁷⁴ He contends that men are placed on the same level as other creatures, that “human beings are generally not singled out for special treatment.”⁷⁵ He further suggests “a highly ecological slant to” the Fall (man has brought about God’s punishment on creation through his misbehavior) and sees “Jesus as the cosmic Christ, the One sent by God to redeem matter as well as man.”⁷⁶

Similar language is used by Loren Wilkinson, professor of Philosophy and integrative studies at Regent College in Vancouver. He, too, refers to Jesus as the “Cosmic Christ.”⁷⁷ Vernon Visick, a campus minister at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, contends that “Jesus provides us with an absolutely crucial method for approaching the environmental crisis.”⁷⁸ Although Visick provides few specifics, he contends that we need “new political forms” and should “integrate the best features of contemporary movements into a larger and more powerful movement.”⁷⁹

Herman Daly and John Cobb press for what they term a theocentric rather than anthropocentric Christianity. In advancing their “biospheric vision” they cite alternative worldviews, such as deep ecology, which they frankly term “a religious vision.” And, in their opinion, “the rise of this vision, especially through the influence of ecological and feminist sensitivities, has been one of the great advances of this generation. Only as the vision deepens and spreads is there hope for making the changes that are required....”⁸⁰

They are particularly fond of deep ecology, though they acknowledge that its commitment to “biocentric equality” is inconsistent with Christian theism. Daly and Cobb also like the Gaia Hypothesis, though they recognize that it, too, has limitations. They go on to “rejoice in the extension of community among those of our time who have come to reaffirm community with all peoples, with other animals, with all living things, and with the whole earth.”⁸¹ While they distinguish themselves from environmentalists who see man as no better than any other species, they acknowledge that “the gulf separating us from some forms of Christianity is as great or greater than what differentiates our form of biospheric perspective from others.”⁸²

Finally, Jay McDaniel presses for both “a biocentric way of thinking about God” and “a biocentric spirituality.” As he explains:

A biocentric spirituality can recognize and value these traditional Christian sensitivities, and it can partake of the various disciplines--meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, service, and worship--that nurture them. In addition, however, it will emphasize three modes of awareness that directly pertain to our interactions with nonhuman nature. These are (1) a feeling for the organism, (2) a feeling for matrices, and (3) an awareness of what Buddhists call “Emptiness” as an enrichment of the first two feelings.⁸³

In the interests of ecumenicism the World Council of Churches included ceremonies that seemed frankly paganistic.

He also proposes "A postpatriarchal Christianity" and cites the work of, among others, Rosemary Ruether, whose theology is less than orthodox.⁸⁴ In particular, he suggests "value-pluralistic thinking," instead of Christianity's past resistance to "the acceptance of a plurality of life paths, a diversity of life orientations, a variety of life-styles."⁸⁵

And these proposals are having an effect, as some churches acquiesce in and ultimately accept doctrines contrary to the basic tenets of their faiths. According to Berit Kjos, for instance, the School of Theology at Claremont reacted positively to a proposal to incorporate witchcraft rituals from Starhawk's book in a theology course. In the interests of ecumenicism the World Council of Churches included ceremonies that seemed frankly paganistic. Even the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, which split from the North American Conference on Religion and Ecology after the latter decided to include Buddhism and Hinduism, has at its conferences materials from Matthew Fox and similar thinkers.⁸⁶ Moreover, as part of their celebrations of Earth Day a number of churches incorporated elements of earth and goddess worship. Warns Donald Bloesch of Dubuque Theological Seminary, there is a spiritual renaissance in many churches and seminaries, but one which "represents a kind of naturalistic mysticism, a reemergence of the ancient religion of the Earth Mother."⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

Simple protection of the environment does not threaten Americans' religious beliefs or economic prosperity. Worship of the environment does. Unfortunately, however, environmentalism is increasingly taking on the trappings of a separate religion, with a consequent distortion of both traditional Jewish and Christian religious practices. Even the more orthodox religious greens are misguided if well-intentioned. Though rightly concerned about the environment, they tend to advance policies antithetical to the proper environmental balance required by Scripture. The popular command-and-control regulatory remedies, for instance, tend to only poorly protect the environment while wasting money--reducing the resources available to meet a variety of other pressing human needs--and slighting the very real human interest in responsible economic growth. Greater reliance on property rights and free markets, in contrast, would better establish institutions that incorporate both benefits and costs and hold parties accountable for their actions. As a result, this approach would more effectively force even nonbelievers to act as stewards, using rather than misusing God's creation.

Nonbelievers, too, have a stake in disentangling environmentalism from paganism. After all, they would also benefit from policies that delivered better ecological protection for less money. More fundamentally, since they are going to have to help pay the upwards of \$40 billion extra annually for the new Clean Air Act on top of the \$150 billion already spent annually to comply with environmental regulation, they should have a say not only on what policies they are paying for, but what spiritual theories they are in effect subsidizing. Indeed, if the First Amendment bars government assistance for traditional churches, perhaps the American people should use it to prohibit turning the new wilderness cathedrals into an established religion.

Protection of the environment does not threaten Americans' religious beliefs or economic prosperity. Worship of the environment does.

About The Author

A Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, Doug Bandow is a nationally syndicated columnist with Copley News Service and the former editor of *Inquiry* magazine. He has been widely published in such periodicals as *Christianity Today*, *Foreign Policy*, *Harper's*, *National Review*, *New Republic*, *Orbis*, *Stewardship Journal*, *World*, as well as leading newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. Bandow has written and edited several books, including *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics* (Crossway), *The Politics of Plunder: Misgovernment in Washington* (Transaction), and *Human Resources and Defense Manpower* (National Defense University).

He has also appeared on numerous radio and television programs, most notably ABC Nightly News, American Interests, CBS Evening News, CNN Crossfire, CNN Larry King Live, Good Morning America, Nightline, and the Oprah Winfrey Show. He formerly served as a Special Assistant to President Reagan and as a Senior Policy Analyst in the Office of the President-Elect and the Reagan for President campaign. He received his B.S. in Economics from Florida State University in 1976 and his J.D. from Stanford University in 1979.

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