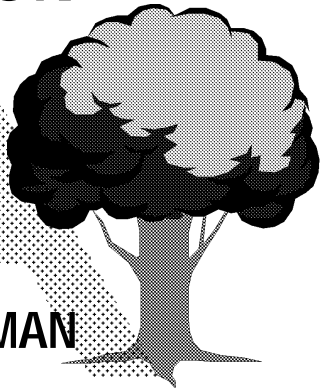


# ENVIRONMENTALISM AS RELIGION

WARREN NEWMAN



We were on the verge of war in the Gulf. Hospitals throughout the world were preparing to deal with deaths and the horrific injuries of modern warfare.

In the Sheraton Park Hotel in London, Green Party activists were holding a conference on the environmental consequences of going to war.

For the first time in history the media were reporting a group of scientists arguing that we should not fight an aggressor like Saddam Hussein *because it would be bad for the environment*.

The content of the scare is almost unimportant. For the record, Dr John Cox, who is an environmental consultant, had said that a smoke cloud of nuclear holocaust proportions would shroud the Gulf after a war, threatening a billion people with starvation because it would cause the Asian Monsoon to fail. At the same conference an adviser to King Hussein predicted a 15 per cent increase in carbon dioxide emissions as a result of war in the Gulf.

The conference decided to set up what they called an 'independent' scientific committee to campaign on the ecological issues.

The campaign comprised a number of self-declared peace activists and not the more rational experts who dismissed the claims for what they were, and we now know them to be: scaremongering based on an unlikely hypothesis.

Nobody doubts that war has many undesirable side effects but it also has many nasty intended effects like the killing and maiming of tens of thousands of human beings alongside the oil-soaked cormorants. We are getting used to apocalyptic predictions of ecological doom. But the idea that the world was about to endure a nuclear winter as a result of burning oilfields was more far-fetched than most. There are many reasons for scare stories increasing in frequency and I intend to develop these separately.

## TRUTH, FICTION AND ECOLATRY

My purpose here is to demonstrate the role of environmentalism as a new religion suited to the demands of an era in which traditional religions are splitting between the extremes of fundamentalism or liberalism. But I must first remind you of one incontrovertible truth which lies behind my interest in the whole area of scaremongering, and of which environmentalism is part.

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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

There is a daily catalogue of stories in the media about foods, drinks, substances and activities which are alleged to be doing us harm. There are as many related speculative stories of disaster to come from rising world populations, food shortages and global warming. Despite all these stories we in the West have never been healthier and never lived so long as we now do. I have dubbed this division between truth and fiction 'The Anxious Society' and I will touch on some aspects of this broader theme. But first to look at environmentalism and the pseudo-religious practices it engenders.

I wanted to give the religious side of environmentalism a name and have chosen to call it 'ecolatry'. The credo of ecolatry is to pursue something quite unobtainable but very desirable — a squeaky-clean world, fed without artificial fertilisers and pesticides, powered by the natural elements: sun, wind and water. A world in which rocks and trees, humans and insects live in balance and harmony. A world in which Nature is God and God is Nature. We are now also seeing the beginnings of so called new-agery. When your stomach is full, and your income reliable, you can afford to worry about your psyche instead. Your mental undernourishment can be fed by a new industry of gurus and mantras, networking and innerspace — management consultants in a new-age disguise.

Half of it may be transcendental guff but, like advertising and public relations, no one can be sure which half. Greenery and new-agery are the new ways in which we first become guilt-ridden and subsequently virtuous as we turn our thoughts towards the heavens with its ozone layers opening and closing in response to our first irresponsible and then wise and benevolent behaviour.

We can wonder with reverence what we are doing to the upper atmosphere while we trample over the young homeless beggars in London streets who would simply love to have access to plastic shoes and non-organic bread.

But I have to demonstrate that environmentalism is becoming a new substitute for religion, especially for those who for a long time have worshipped not God but Socialism and who have seen their belief system disintegrate as the world turned to the market for its economic salvation.

## PRAYERS AND RITUALS

To do that I have to offer a modern definition of religion as 'anything to which we give ultimate allegiance'. Religions offer their followers great truths which are held to be self-evident. They offer a set of rules which, if faithfully and unquestioningly followed, will lead to salvation.

All religions — ancient and modern — dictate to their adherents the practices necessary for good behaviour. They prescribe prayers and rituals, and require various forms of abstinence and self-denial. This combination of faith, cult, community, creed and codes of behaviour makes up what we understand to be religion.

I doubt if Hill & Knowlton, who represent the Church of Scientology, would disagree with this.

Apocalyptic threats from Aids to global warming are presented as the result of man's greed for sex and wealth.

Environmentalism shares these characteristics. The fate of the world is in our hands and everything that afflicts the environment is our fault. But we can do something about it by self-denying behaviour. We can buy 'approved' green products. We can turn down our thermostats. We can give up our cars to please Prince Charles or at least de-lead them. We can abandon spray deodorants. We can follow the religious rituals of sorting our rubbish into different sacks so that it can be recycled. In Camden I would not be surprised if more people now go to the refuse collective depots on Sunday than go to Church.

If we fail to obey these rules of the religion the consequences will be that the sins of the fathers will be visited on the children in the form of a polluted world.

Such special rituals of purchase and waste disposal help us to feel superior towards those who have not seen the environmental light and we can engage in the satisfying task of converting them to the path of goodness, or condemning their evil ways.

This has tremendous psychological value to those who have moved to a more fundamentalist view of their environmentalism.

We have, then, the perfect ingredients for a modernised religion called environmentalism. But we need a God who has the power to control and influence the environment once He or She has recognised our virtuous behaviour. For a candidate I turn to James Lovelock and the God that he unwittingly created — called Gaia. The Gaia hypothesis provides a scientific-cum-philosophical foundation stone. It invites us to treat the earth as a single living organism which itself regulates the planet so that it supports human, animal and plant life. 'The earth as God' is not exactly what Lovelock has in mind but it is a concept with a good pedigree: the planet is older than us, bigger than us and will live on after us, so it is a reasonable religious icon.

And it is being taken as such. *Time* magazine reports that in America there is a developing women's movement aiming to create a female-centred religion which rejects the patriarchal 'God the Father' stance of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Women there are turning to a vague generic Goddess whom they depict as Mother Earth and have named Gaia. They are rejecting the idea of a transcendent God and claiming that their Goddess is located 'within each individual and all things in nature' — a very environmental-religious concept.

### CFCs

Lovelock is a respected atmospheric scientist and no eco-freak: he is terrified of them and in his latest book, *The Ages of Gaia* (Oxford University Press, reprinted in paperback 1992), he explains why.

He was the inventor of a device to measure CFCs in the atmosphere down to parts per trillion in volume. He knew that at that level of sensitivity even the most toxic of chemicals could be breathed or swallowed without harm and indefinitely. But he worried rightly that as soon as he attached numbers to the presence of a substance someone would use them as the basis of a doom story.

And they did. A battle began to ban CFCs in a bid to save the ozone layer. Ozone is a deep blue, explosive and very poisonous gas which has come to be regarded as a beautiful endangered species. No one was dying of the effects of CFC emissions; crops and livestock were unharmed by their presence; the substance is among the most benign chemicals in our homes. If it were not for Lovelock's exquisitely sensitive machine they would have been undetectable.

But our mood from the 70s and beyond has been to respond to alleged environmental hazards in the way that previous generations had responded to witches. We wanted ourselves and our children to be saved from this threat from the heavens. ICI was now the devil incarnate tempting us to give in to our vanities with hair-sprays and deodorants while the planet was being destroyed.

If we were rational we might have regarded the predictions of doom generated by a single industrial chemical as a bit far-fetched. But we were well into the era when anything chemical was bad and anything measurable was harmful and anything harmful should be banned.

Anyone who thought CFCs should not be banned was heretic — a traitor to environmental religious belief.

Scientists were expected to conform to the accepted environmental wisdom of the age — the scientific orthodoxy which has become the equivalent of the religious orthodoxy that forced Galileo to agree that the planets go around the earth. Part of that orthodoxy was to elevate the importance of the magic number *zero*. "There is no safe level of radiation. All radiation and all chemicals are bad," cried the environmentalists.

Yet the Greeks knew that poison depends on the dose. I do not wish to argue here that CFCs are a good thing — although refrigerators clearly are. I only want to argue that because of the way science and environmentalism have interacted, scientific doubt is not tolerated while scientific orthodoxy becomes a creed. (Global warming as a result of the greenhouse effect is a threat to mankind and don't you dare say otherwise!)

### NOT A CONSPIRACY

I do not want or need to offer a grand conspiracy theory to explain this environmental hypochondria. The belief in environmental threats which do not exist arises from an accretion of economic interests without any intent to deceive.

All you need is a hypothesis that substance 'A' may be the cause of illness 'B'. The illness usually has to be something feared by modern society — which today means that a substance is carcinogenic or, if eaten, contributes to heart disease or, if drunk, makes you insane.

First on the scene will be the epidemiologists who search for statistical links which might suggest, but can never prove, cause and effect. A really good threat can produce an abundance of research grants. Other scientists will seek to discover reasons why activity 'A' might influence disease 'B'. They will need to develop equipment to monitor the hypothesis so we now have equipment manufacturers with a commercial interest.

If the hypothesis survives initial scrutiny the chances are that an Authority will be established to police the threat as politicians are forced to respond to public concern. People employed by that Authority are now trapped in the web of innocent people whose financial lives depend on belief in the threat.

Public relations advisers may even find a new market can be established helping companies deal with the threat to their livelihood and subsequently to modify their behaviour to become environmentally sensitive. Big corporations now retain environmentalists as consultants and make financial contributions to their work. So the high priests of environmentalism are well served by academic, research, regulatory and commercial interests that will flesh out and sustain any threat which can be taken seriously. And like any well-organised religion they have access to voluntary contributions from tens of thousands of followers who feel good by giving to the cause.

You do not need a conspiracy nor people who are selfishly promoting their own interests.

The world of science just works that way as researchers battle for funding and the world of business reacts to the commercial potential of any concerns among consumers it can detect and alleviate.

Environmentalism is adopting many of the techniques associated with the more established religions. A few years ago when an unknown but earnest looking young man knocked on my door I used to assume that it was the Jehovah's Witnesses selling *Watchtower*. Now I assume it is Friends of the Earth trying to sell me membership and a subscription to their magazine.

### GREEN CRUSADES

Good evidence that environmentalism has taken on the mantle of conventional religions is that it is now seen as a threat to those religions. And they are fighting back. The last few years have seen an outpouring of books with titles like *God is Green*, and *The Greening of the Church*, written by right thinking Christians.

The 'hard-green' movement is openly anti-Christian since its roots are in Marxism. The Judeo-Christian religions have a philosophical base which is anti-ecological because they promote the dominance of man over other species. But that does not make them anti-environmental.

British environmental consultant and author, John Elkington, believes the established religions will soon be jockeying to build greener congregations. A multi-faith organisation, *Network on Conservation and Religion*, is seeking to build environmental principles into the world's major religions. It may not be long before the recognised seven deadly sins of pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth are joined by the new 'unacceptable environmental impact'.

Let's just hope that we do not have to face green crusades. I began with people wanting to prevent war in the cause of the environment. I hope we do not reach the point of going to war in order to save the environment from polluting tyrants. The signs are not good. We already have movements like *Earth First* which promote environmental terrorism. Most wars have been fought over religious principles, and in the bombing of the cars of animal researchers and burning of fur shops we may be seeing the first skirmishes of violence in the name of fundamentalist environmentalism.

If you want proof of the link between environmentalism and religion you really have to look no further than the announcement by Green Party spokesman and former sports commentator, David Icke, that a devastating earthquake will hit Britain this year as a prelude to the imminent end of the world by 1997. He told us that he was now a channel for the 'Christ Spirit'. He is giving up hopes of leading the Green Party in order to combat the spirit of Lucifer and rebalance the earth. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that the transformation from sportsman, commentator and environmental activist to Messiah had taken his former colleagues by surprise. Having read this you will not be surprised!