

Feature Article: JAF5354

COULD ENVIRONMENTALISM BECOME A GLOBAL RELIGION?

by Dan Story

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 35, number 04 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

After reading my JOURNAL article, “Are Animists Model Environmentalists?”¹ a pastor told me he believed the “one-world religion” allegedly described in Revelation 13:11–18 would not be Islam or some other traditional religion, but environmentalism. At the time, I politely disagreed. But his comment does illustrate the widespread assumption among many Christians that environmentalism—along with pagan nature religions—is evolving into a global *religious* movement. But is this true?

In order to answer this question, it’s necessary to have a clear understanding of just what environmentalists believe.

WHAT IS AN ENVIRONMENTALIST?

My dictionary defines an environmentalist as someone who is concerned with, and advocates the protection of, the environment. This is a broad definition, however, and one that can embrace both moderates and extremists. Unfortunately, in the public’s eye, separating these two factions is difficult. The combative tactics of militant environmental groups often grab the media’s attention, eclipsing the activities and agenda of moderate, mainstream environmentalism. Thus, radical environmentalists have come to represent—especially among conservatives—the official position of the entire environmental movement. It’s imperative, therefore, to distinguish between the two.

Radical Environmentalism

Although small in total number of adherents, radical environmentalism draws support from a variety of religious, nonreligious, and ethical ideologies—and some engage in environmental sabotage and other illegal activities in order to achieve their goals. All persuasions, however, are united by a fundamental philosophical worldview often referred to as *deep ecology*. This is the belief that *Homo sapiens* are only one *ordinary* organism inhabiting the Earth’s biosphere. All plants and animals, as well as inanimate objects, have intrinsic value equal to, if not greater than, human beings. In short, deep ecology endorses *ecocentrism*. It puts the welfare of nature above human welfare.

Christians should rightly condemn radical environmentalism and the philosophy of deep ecology.

Moderate Environmentalism

The vast majority of environmentalists do not endorse deep ecology. They seek ecological and environmental goals through political activism, lobbying, legislation, distributing information, and lawsuits. The majority love outdoor activities and simply want to enjoy nature, set aside natural habitats, manage natural resources in an environmentally sensitive fashion, and prevent the extinction of wildlife. We may not always agree with their goals, but moderate environmentalists employ legal and democratic processes.

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND RELIGION

As the philosophical foundation of radical environmentalism, and as a world and life view, deep ecology plays out in two ways. Some deep ecologists justify their beliefs on naturalistic assumptions, others on spiritual assumptions.

Naturalistic Deep Ecology

Many deep ecologists reject any inclination to view nature as divine or indwelt by goddesses, animistic spirits, or other spiritual entities. They are thoroughly naturalistic, and rationalize their belief that plants, animals, and natural objects have intrinsic value by embracing a scientific, evolutionary starting point—although some admit this view is “often grounded in mystical or intuitive knowledge that is beyond the reach of the scientific method.”² In this quasi-scientific scenario, *Homo sapiens*’ evolutionary heritage—our alleged common ancestry with all life—has resulted in an interdependent, kinship relationship in which humans are merely one of countless other living things inhabiting Earth.

Nature Religion

Other deep ecologists have a spiritual perspective. Elements of animism, pantheism, polytheism, and ancient paganism have recently coalesced in a rapidly growing “new spirituality” movement that can be categorized collectively under the umbrella term, *nature religion*.

The most familiar expressions of nature religion are several varieties of neo-druidism, Wicca (witchcraft), Native American and other animistic traditions, and Gaia. Many of these belief systems blend various religious ideas and practices with a variety of cultural and political ideologies. Generally, however, all of them are characterized by the underlying philosophy of deep ecology. They believe nature is vastly more important than its usefulness to humans; people have no special privileges beyond those of other creatures; and the welfare of nature takes precedence over the welfare of humanity. To this, nature religion would add that the Earth and all living things are united in some kind of spiritual or mystical (essentially pantheistic) organic whole. As

such, Earth is intrinsically sacred. It should be revered and worshipped, and harming nature in any way is a desecrating act.

COULD VARIOUS NATURE RELIGIONS EVOLVE INTO A SINGLE, GLOBAL RELIGION?

In his book, *Dark Green Religion*, Bron Taylor—one of the world’s leading authorities on Earth-based religions—makes the following statement about “dark green religion” (i.e., nature religion): “[Dark green religion] is becoming increasingly important in global environmental politics. It motivates a wide array of individuals and movements that are engaged in some of the most trenchant environmental-related struggles of our time. It increasingly shapes the worldview and practices of grassroots social activists and the world’s intelligentsia....It may even inspire the emergence of a global, civic, earth religion.”³

Despite how this sounds, Taylor is not suggesting that nature religion *will* become a major world religion. In fact he provides evidences that cast doubt on the possibility. For example, he points out that although dark green religion has spread rapidly, “This is not to say that...[it] is on the way to prevalence....Hostility in Western cultures to forms of spirituality that venerate the earth is unlikely to disappear.”⁴ Moreover, he adds, “I would be surprised to see it break out like some new ecotopian contagion in part... because I think there are countertrends that may well prevent such development.”⁵

Still, Taylor doesn’t discount the possibility of Earth-based religions evolving into a global phenomenon. He even hints what might inspire the “world’s teeming billions” into accepting nature religion as a worldwide faith: environmental catastrophe. In other words, if the planet’s deteriorating ecosystems accelerated the global competition for food, fresh water, and energy to the point that millions of people in *developed* countries are scrambling just to acquire the bare necessities of life, it might conceivably usher in a new global, ecocentric nature religion that advances the spiritual values and political ambitions of deep ecology.

I’m certainly not an environmental prophet, but I think this scenario is farfetched. Even if the Earth’s ecosystems continue to decline, I’m skeptical that nature religion will ever become a prominent religious movement. I say this because, as a world and life view, nature religion doesn’t work. It does not—and cannot—fulfill its own philosophical and ethical worldview assumptions and goals. This can be seen in *at least* three ways.

Failure to Restrain Environmental Degradation

One might expect the pro-environment, ecologically conscious way of life promoted in deep ecology and nature religion to have noticeable impact harnessing destructive environmental practices. This isn’t the case. Despite their ecological sensitivity and sometimes aggressive environmental tactics, radical environmentalists and practitioners of nature religion have failed to foster an environmental ethos that has broad appeal beyond their own relatively small inner circle of adherents. Christian environmentalist

Loren Wilkinson points out that neopagans and other “new spirituality” movements have done little to lessen “the growing engine of economic globalization, with its tendency to ignore the limits of creation in pursuit of the creation of wealth....So despite the appearance of various ‘Earth’ or ‘creation’ spiritualities, human behavior has not changed much”⁶ in terms of reining in hostile and damaging environmental behavior.

Failure as a Livable Lifestyle

Devotees to nature religion and deep ecology *cannot* consistently live out their beliefs that nonhumans and natural objects are equal to, or more valuable than, humans. Virtually every day people are confronted with circumstances where the welfare of nature butts up against the welfare of people, and choices must be made as to which one triumphs. It may be as simple as exterminating gophers that have invaded the yard or as serious as deciding whether to let people go hungry in order to avoid developing vital cropland.

Such conflicts illustrate a hierarchy in terms of the value of competing life forms. If an issue puts the health and welfare of people in jeopardy, the inevitable decision must always support human life over animal life and inanimate nature. That’s just the way it is—and should be. We can be certain that if neopagans, deep ecologists, or any other Earth-venerating people can benefit from lifesaving drugs, or if *their* children are going hungry, they will relinquish their closely held beliefs in a heartbeat, even if procuring medicine and food is destructive to nature.

Failure to Reduce Human Suffering

If lived out consistently, nature religion and deep ecology will do little to help poor, impoverished people. A religious view that elevates the importance and worth of nature over people would inevitably devalue people and ignore human suffering. The well-being of an animal species or fragile habitat would presumably take precedence over the welfare of humans. Bron Taylor admits that “some engaged in dark green [nature] religion have been indifferent to the suffering of marginalized peoples, whether African slaves, indigenous people, or the urban poor.”⁷

ECOLOGICAL EVANGELISM

The reader can see by now that I find no reason to believe that environmentalism will evolve into a global religion. Christians *should* be concerned, however, about the growing influence of Earth-based religions and other brands of radical environmentalism. For one, it can lead to non-Christian religions becoming the spiritual and ethical force behind today’s re-emerging global environmental movement. This can seduce myriad environmentalists into pagan nature worship and other counterfeit religions. Second, failure to engage these movements hinders Christian evangelism and outreach to secular environmentalists and followers of nature religion.

Many Christians shy away from involvement in pro-environmental activities because they consider environmentalism the agenda of political liberals and their tree-hugging allies—and a breeding ground for Earth-based religions. On the flip side, in the

eyes of many environmentalists, Christians are apathetic to environmental and ecological exploitation—if not actually responsible for it. These two unwarranted beliefs have prompted spiritually seeking environmentalists to look to other religions for guidance in environmental ethics and stewardship. Christian environmental writer Ghilleen T. Prance issued a warning about this:

There is obviously a growing realization in the secular world that the environmental crisis is indeed a moral issue, and so the world is turning to religious leaders and philosophers for help. This is a challenge to which Christians must be in the forefront of the response if there is to be any lasting and serious commitment to responsible, sustainable stewardship of our planet. If we do not respond, our place will be taken by false gods and other religions that worship creation rather than the Creator.⁸

When nonbelievers observe Christians sincerely showing concern for the natural world, or when they work side-by-side with Christians on ecologically friendly activities, it can provide tremendous evangelistic opportunities—especially among college students and other young adults who are alert to Earth’s mounting environmental and ecological problems. Christian involvement in pro-environmental activities can provide culturally relevant apologetic points of contact for reaching young people with the gospel—as well as environmentalists and Earth worshippers. Author and pastor Tri Robinson, who includes environmental ministry programs as part of his church ministry, comments on this:

Through becoming faithful stewards of creation, we are presented with an opportunity to share the Gospel....

Many people are often enamored with the beauty of the world around them, yet they haven’t yet met the Creator....

Environmental ministry outreach not only puts believers in the community but it puts them working hand in hand with those who have not yet received Christ. In outreach, making the connection and building relationships is 90 percent of the work—and usually the hardest. Eventually, when other people begin to see the light of Jesus alive in us, the opportunities to share our faith will come...and they come at their request.⁹

For several years before I became a Christian, I was involved in a wildlife rescue center and active in the Sierra Club as an outings leader. If a club member had shared God’s love and concern for nature, and His desire for the human race to be His caretakers over creation, there is a good chance I would have become a Christian years earlier. It would have been just the kind of apologetic point of contact needed to draw a nature lover like me to Jesus Christ.

I strongly believe that if Christians assume their rightful, God-ordained role as His caretakers over creation, the radical elements of environmentalism would be swept aside by young Christians flooding the ranks of the environmental movement, leading many environmentalists into the kingdom of Christ.

Dan Story has an M.A. in Christian apologetics and is the author of six books and numerous booklets and articles. Portions of this article are adapted from his newest book, *Should Christians Be Environmentalists?* (Kregel Publications, 2012). Dan can be contacted at www.danstory.net.

NOTES

- 1 Dan Story, "Are Animists Model Environmentalists?" *Christian Research Journal* 33, 2 (2010): 44–51.
- 2 Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature and Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 14.
- 3 Taylor, *Dark Green Religions*, ix–x.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 6 Loren Wilkinson, "The Making of the Declaration," in *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, ed. R. J. Berry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 53.
- 7 Taylor, *Dark Green Religions*, 217.
- 8 Ghilleen T. Prance, "The Earth under Threat," in *The Care of Creation*, 117.
- 9 Tri Robinson with Jason Chatraw, *Saving God's Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church's Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship* (Norcross, GA: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), 58, 140.