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Environmentalism as Religion

(extrait de AgBioView du 26 avril 2010,

http://www.agbioworld.org/newsletter_wm/index.php?caseid=archive&newsid=2972)

- Paul H. Rubin, Wall Street Journal, April 22, 2010 <http://online.wsj.com>

'While people have worshipped many things, we may be the first to build shrines to garbage.'

Many observers have made the point that environmentalism is eerily close to a religious belief system, since it includes creation stories and ideas of original sin. But there is another sense in which environmentalism is becoming more and more like a religion: It provides its adherents with an identity.

Scientists are understandably uninterested in religious stories because they do not meet the basic criterion for science: They cannot be tested. God may or may not have created the world-there is no way of knowing, although we do know that the biblical creation story is scientifically incorrect. Since we cannot prove or disprove the existence of God, science can't help us answer questions about the truth of religion as a method of understanding the world.

But scientists, particularly evolutionary psychologists, have identified another function of religion in addition to its function of explaining the world. Religion often supplements or replaces the tribalism that is an innate part of our evolved nature.

Original religions were tribal rather than universal. Each tribe had its own god or gods, and the success of the tribe was evidence that their god was stronger than others.

But modern religions have largely replaced tribal gods with universal gods and allowed unrelated individuals from outside the tribe to join. Identification with a religion has replaced identification with a tribe. While many decry religious wars, modern religion has probably net reduced human conflict because there are fewer tribal wars. (Anthropologists have shown that tribal wars are even more lethal per capita than modern wars.)

It is this identity-creating function that environmentalism provides. As the world becomes less religious, people can define themselves as being Green rather than being Christian or Jewish.

Consider some of the ways in which environmental behaviors echo religious behaviors and thus provide meaningful rituals for Greens:

* There is a holy day-Earth Day.

* There are food taboos. Instead of eating fish on Friday, or avoiding pork, Greens now eat organic foods and many are moving towards eating only locally grown foods.

* There is no prayer, but there are self-sacrificing rituals that are not particularly useful, such as recycling. Recycling paper to save trees, for example, makes no sense since the effect will be to reduce the number of trees planted in the long run.

* Belief systems are embraced with no logical basis. For example, environmentalists almost universally believe in the dangers of global warming but also reject the best solution to the problem, which is nuclear power. These two beliefs co-exist based on faith, not reason.

* There are no temples, but there are sacred structures. As I walk around the Emory campus, I am continually confronted with recycling bins, and instead of one trash can I am faced with several for different sorts of trash. Universities are centers of the environmental religion, and such structures are increasingly common. While people have worshipped many things, we may be the first to build shrines to garbage.

* Environmentalism is a proselytizing religion. Skeptics are not merely people unconvinced by the evidence: They are treated as evil sinners. I probably would not write this article if I did not have tenure.

Some conservatives spend their time criticizing the way Darwin is taught in schools. This is pointless and probably counterproductive. These same efforts should be spent on making sure that the schools only teach those aspects of environmentalism that pass rigorous scientific testing. By making the point that Greenism is a religion, perhaps we environmental skeptics can enlist the First Amendment on our side. --- Mr. Rubin is a professor of economics at Emory University. He is the author of "Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom" (Rutgers University Press, 2002).