

Religious Undercurrents in Environmentalism and Forestry:
Introduction to the Working Group Session

Environmentalism, Green Religion, Scientism, Why?

Introduction to the Session

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Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths (Kimball. 1992; 1)

I am a pantheist. I believe in the 'holiness' of the earth and all other living things...Our very survival depends on the air 'god'... (Cassie, a 'believer' in nature religion, quoted in D. I. Smith's "Forest Management and the Theology of Nature"; American Forests Nov/Dec 1993)

Environmental policy-making often turns out to be a battlefield for religious conflict. Rather than rational policy analysis, the making of natural resource and environmental policy in the United States has become an exercise in theological controversy. (Nelson 1990)

Unless the forestry profession becomes the leader in forest environmentalism, there is a significant risk that forestry in the future will be based largely on green religion. (Kimmins 1993)

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Introduction

The idea for this session came to fruition at the Philosophy and History Working group meeting in Edmonton in October 2004. Participants considered several possible topics for the Society's 2005 convention and finally, with a strong consensus, reached agreement on a panel dealing with aspects of “environmentalism as a green religion”, a topic which has been modified as we worked at it.

Largely through e-mail, the strong leadership of Chairman Ed Barnard, and a core of interested Working Group members, some of whom you will hear as we go along, the program was shaped. As stimulating as the topic is, the group soon asked, “Why are we doing this?” “Why this session?” In part it is to follow-up to a session at the 1999 Portland, Oregon Convention entitled “Forests and Religion”. In part it is a response to the Open Community Forum that took place at the 2000 Convention in Washington, D.C. At that Forum some (approximately) 800 foresters listed and then ranked the most compelling science and policy issues facing forestry and the SAF. Forty-three issues made the final list. We list below five of the final “top-ten” issues from that Forum, numbered according to their priority ranking.

1. **Ending the cold war between foresters and environmentalists.**
4. Management of public lands for multiple values and uses.
5. How will we make foresters relevant as professionals in our society?
6. Are we relevant? Expressing it? Restoring societal support for forestry?
9. **Building relationships with the environmental community.**

Of the 43 final issues, eight were highly technical, six a mix of technical/societal, and the remaining 29 were social/political issues. We seem to know that the major issues facing forestry are not technical, but rather they are social and political. Indeed, could they be “religious” in some way? How do “religious convictions” play into these issues, if at all?

Please note that the first ranked issue of the 2000 Open Community Forum was to “end the cold **WAR** between foresters and environmentalists.” The idea of war has been invoked quite often in the dialogue between and among foresters and environmentalists (Limerick 2002). We are concerned that the warfare metaphor creates an “us vs. them,” and a “win or lose” situation, when in fact we are dealing with fellow citizens expressing their honest views in a participative democracy. In civil dialogue one must offer a strong rationale with strong passion to make his or her message compelling. In any dialogue or debate, one should be able to understand and constructively debate the views of those with differing perspectives. In order to facilitate dialogue and understanding, this panel has been developed to consider the views and philosophical foundations of two perspectives, those of “environmentalists” and “foresters” that often and unfortunately (?) have been traditionally viewed as opposites. Specifically, we hope to consider and

understand some of the "religious" aspects of these perspectives. Thus, this panel will address, among other things, issues of "environmentalism as green religion", "the greening of religion", "enchantment", and "scientism as the religion of forestry". How, if at all, have these perceptions or realities influenced forest resource management? How have they influenced the "war"? Are their influences positive, negative, or neutral? Are they reconcilable?

Religion: Relationship to Environmentalism and Forestry?

The American Heritage dictionary of the English Language (10/18/2004) defines religion in terms of belief and reverence for a supernatural power; beliefs, values, and practices based on the teaching of a spiritual leader, and "...a cause, principle, or activity pursued with zeal or conscientious devotion". French social theorist Gustave LeBon wrote that "A person is not religious solely when he worships a divinity, but when he puts all the resources of his mind, the complete submission of his will, and the whole-souled ardor of this fanaticism at the service of a cause or an individual who becomes the goal and guide of his thoughts and actions". Other scholarly definitions do not differ greatly from the above, but often emphasize that religion attempts to "provide understanding of that which cannot be experienced through the human senses and the rational mind" (Einhorn, 1998). Interestingly, historian Roderick Nash comments that environmental views are often generated by a set of "eco-theologians" promoting a new "gospel of ecology" (Nelson 1990). This is a point that many foresters, being trained in "hard science", seem to have a problem with, confusing things other than the rational mind as being simple emotion. The opposite of rational, however, is not emotional, it is irrational. And the opposite of emotional is not rational, but rather stoical.

The key points of these understandings are that (1) religions often, but not always involve the supernatural; (2) religions often involve a spiritual leader; and (3) religions involve belief and action carried out with zeal. The importance of religion, and therefore of our current discussion, is that religion creates beliefs and values that lead to action. Sociologist Jacques Barzun (2001) has proposed that one aspect of a profession (e.g., forestry), and we can add of a movement like that of environmentalism, is that, "...it is a collection of people captive to a set of ideas". If we, as foresters, do not believe that our ideas of forestry have carried the day, or are getting a fair hearing in the previously alluded to "war", perhaps we should ask, "Are we captive to the wrong set of ideas?" Are we open to changing our ideas based on new knowledge?" "Are we simply not getting our ideas across?" Or again, "What are the ideas and influences with which we are competing?"

Einhorn (1998) lists five aspects of religion; 1) rites, traditions, and myths, 2) moral/ethical values, 3) comfort and caring social systems, 4) social systems, 5) spiritual (divine) content. Could it be that environmentalism and forestry are so structured and therefore are religious? For example, 1) rites, traditions, and myths - Gaia, creation, or evolution, 2) moral/ethical values - old growth, conservation, preservation, wilderness,

science, the greatest good, profit margins, biodiversity, productivity, or other dogmas, 3) comfort and caring - spiritual renewal, recreation, sustenance, lifestyle, economic prosperity and progress, 4) social systems - cause oriented fellowships or associations, professional groups, associated obligations and dogma, and 5) spiritual (divine) content - a spiritual leader (Leopold, Muir, Carson, Pinchot, God), sacred places (National Parks, National Forests, personal property, comfortable homes).

Kimmins (1993) has suggested that "green religion" provides to society a set of ethical standards and moral responsibilities about our forests, concepts analogous to contributions of classical religions to humanity. He further suggests that "unfettered by secular considerations and scientifically based information, religion can become a rigid control system that, taken to extremes, can lead to totalitarian political control..." Is this what concerns foresters? Presumably, foresters are not fearful of ethical standards and moral responsibilities. But are we afraid of someone else's religion gaining totalitarian control? What about the possibility of our own totalitarianism, or the totalitarianism of science?

We submit that engaging in discussions of religion as it shapes environmentalism and forestry is not at all unnatural. Understanding (and admitting?) the reality of the obvious religious undercurrents is perhaps an entry point to attenuating the hostility between two traditionally separated camps. Reconciliation of differences, recognition of commonalities, and development of a consensus approach to managing natural resources in a human-dominated world depends, at least in part, on such understanding. As we evaluate our own or alternative passionately held belief systems or sets of convictions (religions?) we are well advised to think about our evaluation methodology. Solomon (1994) has proposed criteria by which belief systems can be evaluated. Belief systems should be rational, supported by evidence, provide a satisfying explanation of reality, and offer a satisfactory basis for living. Similarly, Zacharias (1994) has posited that systems claiming truth ought to stand the tests of logical consistency, empirical adequacy, and experiential relevance. How well do environmentalism and forestry as belief systems measure up? We close by challenging both foresters and environmentalists to think, and in particular to think about how to apply such knowledge to the overwhelming task of managing natural resources in a sustainable way. In so doing, ponder the following.

1. Has forestry become captive to the utilitarian phrase made famous by Gifford Pinchot, "The greatest good for the greatest number over the long run," such that we have adopted it with so much religious fervor that we can not or will not accept other modes of thought?
2. Has environmentalism become a religion unto itself?

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