

Religious Aspects of Environmentalism

By Peter J. Hansen

As Matt Crawford has pointed out, the problem of technology can be divided in two, conceptually if not always in practice. There is manipulation of the natural world around us, and the more troubling manipulation of human nature itself. I'd like to focus on the former; maybe this will cast some light on the latter.

Contemporary environmentalism means wariness of or hostility to the manipulation of non-human nature for human ends. We don't see environmentalists strenuously opposing manipulation of human nature itself. I think this is because much of what propels the movement is egalitarianism or *ressentiment*. A product of advanced democracy, environmentalism is suspicious of man precisely because he acts as master towards the rest of nature, because he is or claims to be in some way superior to the rest of nature. What claims superiority must be bad or evil: That, I think, is the core sentiment. That man himself might become the object of his own manipulation is therefore less troubling than what man does to spotted owls or old-growth forests.

Nonetheless, environmentalism contains healthy ingredients. I remember Allan Bloom commenting in a lecture once that during the 1950s Americans loved the smell of Gary, Indiana. "That smell meant jobs, prosperity, progress." Technology was still a relatively new force in people's lives; its benefits were manifest; and love was blind, at least in its first blush or crush.

Without getting into Heideggerian subtleties, there is something perverse about savoring smog. Environmentalism helped produce an awakening from this mild collective insanity. It encouraged Americans and Europeans to be a little more skeptical of technology, and a little more trusting of nature.

More fundamentally, environmentalism insists that we are part of nature, and part of the earth we live on. In some mysterious way, we humans are made of the same stuff as the animals and trees and even rocks and dirt around us. Far from being gods who stand astride the earth, we

are radically dependent upon the earth around us, and in us.

Of course environmentalism does not leave it at encouraging skepticism and reminding us that we are not gods. (Not much of a political agenda in that.) On the contrary, it somehow turns out that we are gods after all, or rather devils.

Environmentalism warns incessantly about impending disaster. Earth itself is “in the balance,” as the title of Al Gore’s book put it.

Many have remarked that environmentalism resembles religious doctrines. We are warned that humans are sinning; that a great catastrophe impends; that the world may end. To say nothing of other difficulties, however, this view tacitly assumes a natural world which is beneficent or at least stable, which will do us no harm if we do it no harm. But this Eden is less plausible than the religious one it seems to replace. The natural world (as distinguished from God) has no will and observes no rules. It isn’t stable and isn’t a single thing at all, but is rather a vast sea of things all of which are in constant flux.

Some natural changes benefit mankind, and some don’t. (According to current estimates, for example, the next Ice Age is due in a few thousand years. This will surely wreak havoc with life as we know it--unless human technology intervenes.) While caution is always appropriate, there is no reason to think that affecting our environment is a violation of some eternal law, a rousing of some heretofore slumbering giant. There is indeed a giant, but it never slumbers.

Environmentalism and Biblical religions share two related beliefs. Once there was a golden age; and then man interfered. Now there may be genuine religions without an Eden or a Fall (I’m no expert). It seems to me, however, that we see in environmentalism what is arguably the core element of religion as such: a transcendent moral order in which man lives and by which he is judged.

Environmentalism emphasizes man’s ability to do harm rather than good for more or less the same reason that religion does. Even today, few people embrace doctrines in which human goodness comfortably assures us of everything we long for. It just can’t be that easy. We sense our mortality, our smallness, even as we hope to transcend it.

It's somehow easier to swallow that humans are capable of great evil, that we are tempted to sinful and dangerous behavior. The gratification such a doctrine provides is less obvious; it entails rigors and hardships; the tremendous exaltation falls almost into the background. Nonetheless, it satisfies our psychological need for a world in which we transcend our brief and fragile lives.

I don't think environmentalism rivals the great religions in plausibility or cogency. I doubt it will have a thousand-year run; but time will tell. At any rate, as far as scientific manipulation of non-human nature is concerned, I don't see any genuine danger that we're about to bring the curtain down on the human comedy.

I leave to the rest of you the more disturbing possibilities raised by our manipulation of human nature itself, though here too my inclination is to suspect that the danger, though real, is perhaps less than we're inclined to fear.