

Because It Is My Religion

by Connie Barlow

The greening of traditional religious faith is a hugely important component of the ecoreligious movement. But there are other ways, as well, to infuse ecological concern with a vision of the sacred. There are other ways to fill the perhaps innate drive for religious grounding with memes that can serve the Earth community.



ever-so-secular environmentalists and supporters of wild life and wild lands are being put to shame by the Christian green. The Quakers who publish the liberal interfaith magazine *Earthlight* and the by-the-Book evangelicals who publish *Green Cross* are willing to back their preservationist views with the gutsiest of all reasons: because it is my religion. Each holds that we must end the assault on Earth and the diversity of life because (as the liberals say) the Earth is sacred, or because (as the evangelicals say) we have a responsibility to God's creation.

Consider this statement, which appears in the lead article of the winter 1996 issue of *Green Cross*: "God made it clear to Noah that He cared so much for the creatures He had created, that He wanted each one of them to be saved from impending extinction... Concerns about time or money apparently were not raised by Noah. Neither were questions about the significance or worthiness of each species. Noah did as the Lord commanded him." The author, Calvin DeWitt, then recounts the tragedy of today's human-caused wave of species extinctions, and concludes his essay with an impassioned plea. "The great gallery of the Creator is being trashed. The great treasury of the Creation is being converted to ash. Where are the Noahs?"

DeWitt and other environmentalists motivated by their Christian faith thus push for many of the same legislative and personal actions as you and I do, but their arguments resonate with a special power. "Because it is my religion." Imagine speaking those words to your most conservative legislator! Beyond the litany of anthropocentric functions served by wild life and wild lands, beyond the intricate logical edifices on which species rights and intrinsic value are pressed, lies the ultimate argument for environmental and species protection. And this argument is as American, unpointyheaded, and unprivileged as apple pie.

Because it is my religion.

Can we find the courage to proclaim that? I think we can and must. This essay is an exploration of how we secular enthusiasts of environmental values may not be (and certainly need not be) so secular after all.

A SURPRISE FROM SOCIOBIOLOGY

Not long ago it was intellectually fashionable to declare that religion's time had passed. Religious sentiments—and even more so, religious dogma and institutions—were regarded as drags on human progress. Supernatural belief bound the individual to pre-rational states of consciousness and choked societies with doctrines invented in pre-modern times. Marxists assailed skyward-looking religions for lulling the downtrodden into accepting a wretched existence here on earth. Nietzsche proclaimed, "God is dead." Meanwhile, secular humanists held a mirror to themselves, turning to humankind and human culture as the only aspects of heaven and earth worthy of reverence. We ourselves were the beginning and end of all meaning and value.

Smug disregard of the religious impulse has recently fallen out of fashion, however—even among atheistic intellectuals. Many people now realize that a sense of the sacred need not be based on superstition and supernaturalism. Joseph Campbell, who held that religion was whatever put one "in accord" with the universe, delighted in the mythic metaphors of diverse religious heritages while savaging those who corrupted a metaphor by claiming its material truth. Theologian James Gustafson presents a definition of religion that is as accessible to atheists as theists, and which, moreover, offers possibilities for making peace with the Earth. In Gustafson's view, the religious capacity manifests as "a sense of dependence, of gratitude, obligation, remorse or repentance, and of possibility."

The human religious capacity is also being taken seriously today in part because of the work of biologists with impeccable credentials as scientific materialists. These scientists made the astonishing discovery that the religious impulse (for good or ill) may be too deeply rooted to be rooted out.

Jacques Monod (1919–1976) was a molecular biologist who combined the authority of a Nobel laureate with a passion for philosophy and a gift with words. In his 1971 masterpiece, *Chance and Necessity*, Monod surmised that the capacity for religious experience and the hunger for religious explanation owe to the same force that shaped our opposable thumbs: natural selection.

Evolution of mental capacities that bolstered group cohesion beyond the innate genetic concern for close relatives would have helped members of larger groups cooperate for the good of all. Scientists writing after Monod recognized that, even if loyalty, valor, and the surety of meaning offered by religious belief took a toll on the fitness of warriors who died defending the tribe, such seemingly altruistic acts nevertheless benefited copies of warrior genes carried in the chromosomes of remaining kin. Members of groups made coherent and strong by shared religious conviction thus would have been favored by evolution. "We are the descendants of such men," Monod wrote. "From them we have probably inherited our need for an explanation, the profound disquiet which goads us to search out the meaning of existence. That same disquiet has created all the myths, all the religions, all the philosophies, and science itself."

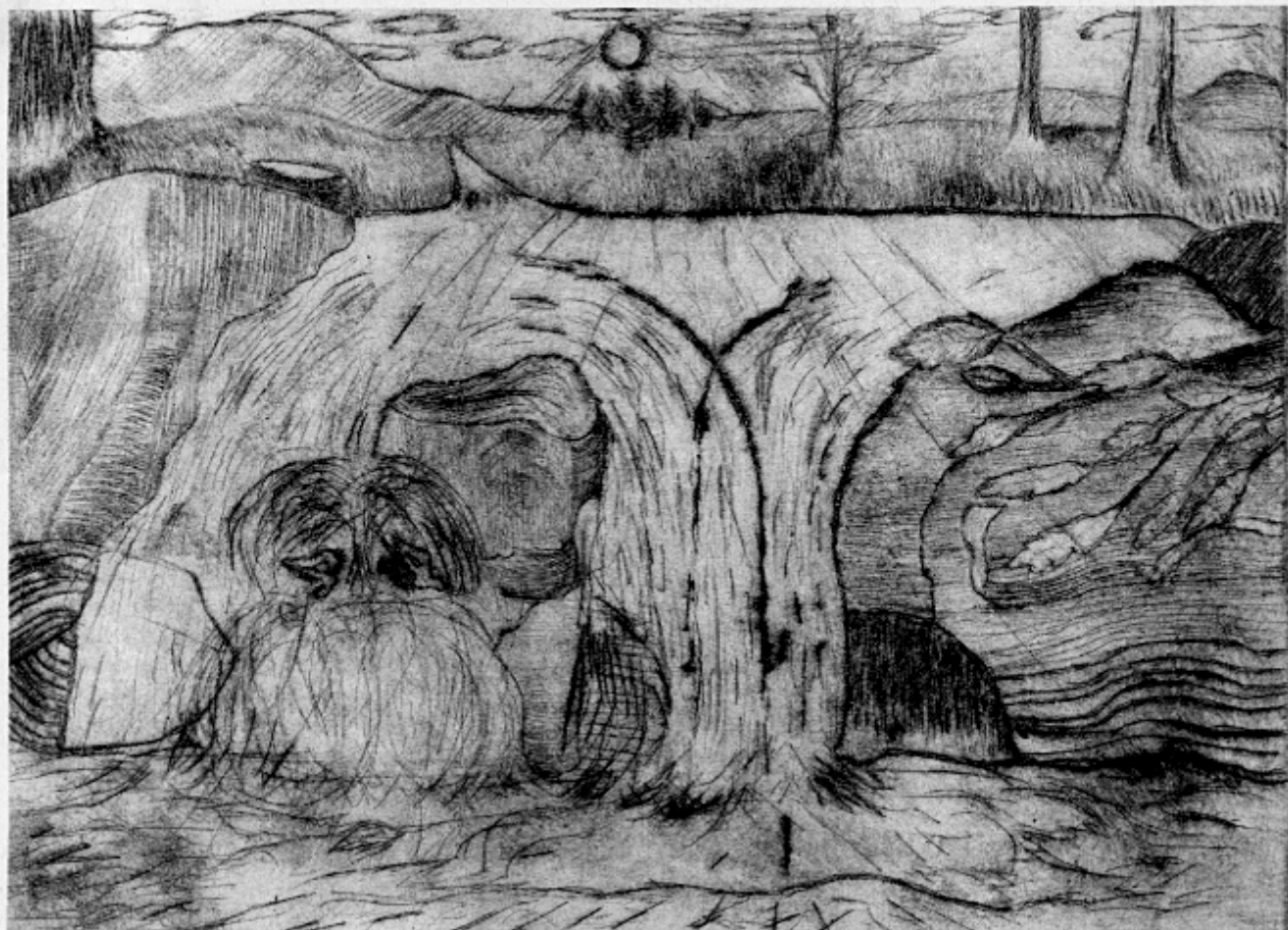
Through the millennia, not only the capacity but the need for a religious framework entered our very DNA. The drive to find or construct a complete explanation by which to orient ourselves and our goals in the universe is thus innate. Its absence, Monod cautioned, "begets a profound ache within."

Edward O. Wilson took up where Jacques Monod left off. In 1975, with a massive tome titled *Sociobiology*, Wilson founded a new branch of science. Sociobiology draws from the fields of evolutionary biology and population biology to explore the evolutionary roots of all sorts of social behavior in animals—from mating

rituals and dominance hierarchies expressed in many species to the very few forms of behavior and emotion that seem to have no analog outside our own kind. Sociobiology thus looks at social behavior from an adaptationist standpoint. How, for example, does an instinct to whistle an alarm call help a prairie dog propagate its genes? How might deception—even self-deception—enhance the evolutionary fitness of an ape?

A few years after publishing *Sociobiology*, Wilson left prairie dogs and chimpanzees behind, narrowing his focus to the human species. In so doing, he widened his scope to include matters of philosophy and religion. The resultant book, *On Human Nature*, was not a work of science, Wilson demurred. It was more a "speculative essay"—a speculative essay that earned its author a Pulitzer Prize. Nevertheless, the science and argumentation Wilson presented on the sociobiology of religion were formidable, going well beyond the groping ideas that his fellow biologist, Jacques Monod, had pioneered.

The predisposition to religious faith is "the most complex and powerful force in the human mind," Wilson concluded. It is likely "an ineradicable part of human nature." Wilson went on to make a daring proposal: Rather than allowing the innate religious capacity to fill with old superstitions and fears, why not fill it with an exaltation of the natural world illuminated by science? Science offers humankind the grandeur of what Wilson called "the evolutionary epic." (Note the extension into poetry, meaning, and subjectivity implied by the word 'epic'.) The evolutionary epic is the creation story for our time. My story and your story are not just part of the triumphant march of humankind. They are part of the even grander story of the evolutionary stream of life, of planet Earth, and of the universe. Moreover, the grandeur of that story stands firm, even when faith in ourselves and our kind begins to flag.



By taking the evolutionary epic into our hearts, we would be inclined, Wilson hopes, to dedicate a good portion of our religious zeal into reverence for the vast diversity of life produced by nearly four billion years of struggle and symbiosis on Earth. By way of the evolutionary epic, we can redesign our prescriptions for spiritual allurements and atonement. And we can revisit the questions of ultimate meaning and value.

All this is possible because the capacity for religious experience and explanation is just that—a capacity. Genes do not tell us how the world came into being. Genes do not determine what we revere, or even worship. These crucial details are, rather, the workings of the cultural counterpart of genes: memes.

The term ‘meme’ is the brainchild of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. He invented it to signify the

route by which cultural evolution tracks that of biological evolution. Examples of memes are “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches,” explains Dawkins. “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain.” The term is an artful invention, owing to its sound resemblance to gene (meme rhymes with cream) and its etymological connection to words like ‘mimetic’ and the French word *même* (meaning, same). The meme of meme is now wildly successful. Writers who normally have no truck with evolutionary biology or any other science now find it indispensable.

Memes are what give substance to our inchoate capacities for religiousness. Whether they enter our brains by

thoughtful or thoughtless invitation or by indoctrination, particular memes are usually what we judge when we speak of religion in friendly or unfriendly ways.

Overall, even if the mythopoeic drive and other vestiges of the religious are innate, it seems to be a cultural choice whether these are expressed through memes that will impair or enhance our bond with other species and the Earth itself. Both nature-phobic and nature-philic religious memes are evident in the world today. We do have a choice. Moreover, the choice may be genetically slanted in favor of what, in today’s vernacular, would be called “green.”

Here E.O. Wilson is again the pioneer. He has suggested that a desire to associate with, even to love, living things is not just a cultural choice. In his 1984 book, *Biophilia*, Wilson claimed that “to affiliate with life is a



deep and complicated process in mental development. To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents." Wilson's "biophilia hypothesis" may be highly speculative, possibly unconfirmable; but the idea that love of living things may be genetically imprinted in human nature has been a smashing success. The terminology has caught on, the hypothesis is talked about, and the beginnings of a research program in biophilia are evident.

Biologist Jared Diamond, no less a proponent of biodiversity protection than E.O. Wilson, has his doubts about the reality of biophilia. His long association with tribal people in New Guinea, whom he has come to know during his birding expeditions to remote forests, makes him question the rosy view of biophilia. New Guineans are extremely knowledgeable about the biological landscape; hunting and gathering are ways of life. But their treatment of animals can be ghastly. He gives several examples, among them: extracting bones for nose ornaments from the wings of live bats; keeping snared animals fresh by transporting them alive, but preventing escape by breaking their legs.

Why would Jared Diamond offer as evidence against Wilson's hypothesis the apparent absence of biophilia in just one small tribe in New Guinea? What about the love of living things evident in the goldfish ponds of Japanese gardens, in the myriad backyard

bird feeders of suburban America, in the altogether new concept of "animal rights"? The answer is that hunter-gatherer cultures are where we must look to assess whether any psychological trait has a genetic basis. The field of evolutionary psychology (a subset of sociobiology in which humans are the focus) builds its hypotheses on the notion that our psyches were honed by the hundreds of thousands of years our lineage spent in the Stone Age. Our brains have had little time to adjust to modern exigencies. If love of living things finds its fullest expression in cultures where the unpleasantness, hardships, and outright dangers of the natural world have been removed from everyday life, perhaps biophilia is a cultural emergent.

Unlike biophilia, religious sentiments do seem to be common to all cultures. The mythopoeic drive, a sense of the sacred, and other manifestations of the religious are thus even more likely than biophilia to have a strong genetic component. Of course, likelihood is not certitude. Even if a human capacity is found to be universal, there is still a danger in granting it a genetic basis. Just because all hunter-gatherer cultures know how to flint, for example, this does not mean that flint flaking is an inborn capacity. Cultural inheritance from a single moment of innovation during the evolution of genus *Homo*, multiple discovery, or even borrowing—not chromosomes—probably keeps this particular skill going. How, then, could we possibly know that the mythopoeic drive, but not flint flaking, has jumped to the genes?

Maybe it doesn't matter.

Consider: we know in other facets of evolution that certain magnificent traits were probably not deliberately evolved. That is, they are exaptations, not adaptations. Exaptations are serendipitous by-products of selective forces that were sculpting something else. Insect wings, for example, may have started as sails evolved to help their bearers glide across the surface of a

pond. Only later were they co-opted for powered flight. The vertebrate jaw likely began as a paired gill arch, exapted into service for clamping the mouth shut when a gulp of water was forced out through the gills. The respiratory function remained even when the structure was exapted again to aid in food-getting (simple teeth) and then again to aid in food-processing (teeth that could rip) and finally even more sophisticated food processing (teeth that could grind). Similarly, owing to natural selection—perhaps a form of natural selection called sexual selection (involving the often whimsical preferences of the opposite sex)—we seem to have evolved brains with the capacity not just to think useful thoughts but to ruminate about all sorts of strange things. Surely intelligence, in general, was selected for. A by-product of intelligence is that we begin to wonder about the meaning of it all. And if there is no meaning, we need to invent it—else we risk falling prey to what Monod called the "profound ache within."

Whether an adaptation, exaptation, or cultural inclination—whether expressed through memes that are reasonable responses to an only partially known reality or just fantasy—the religious urge is rising like the phoenix today. The upsurge in spiritual (and outright magical) tendencies in the former Soviet Union, the attraction of fundamentalist doctrines in the Middle East, and the trend in my own generation in America to head back to church or into a coven is empirical evidence that the religious capacity must be taken seriously. More to the point, it offers an opportunity not to be missed.

VARIETIES OF ECORELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In 1990, thirty-two prominent scientists, led by Carl Sagan, put their signatures to a document titled "An Open Letter to the Religious Community." Freeman Dyson, Stephen Jay Gould, Motoo Kimura, Lynn Margulis, Peter Raven, Stephen Schneider, and

Conversation with an Earth Ecstatic

Connie Barlow talks with Diane Ackerman

CB: In your latest book, *The Rarest of the Rare*, a religious sensibility comes through in your encounters with endangered species, in a kind of communion with nature. Would you, in fact, describe yourself as religious?

DA: I've always felt an ecological spiritualism, and this powers everything that I write. When I was growing up, I was simply curious about all religions, all peoples—everything. As a teenager, I read about the lives of saints and explored oriental religions. These days I may read a book by a Jewish mystic, or by a Buddhist, or by other religious folk, as well as books by novelists and poets and nonfiction writers. I don't feel satisfied by any organized religion that I've encountered. Yet I'm probably the most religious person I've met. I'm deeply religious. It's just that I don't require a governing god in my sense of the sacred.

CB: One of my mentors, the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley, wrote a book called *Religion Without Revelation*. The religion he was promoting was essentially a celebration of the evolutionary epic. What struck me was that even though Julian was an atheist, he wanted to claim the word *religion*. He didn't want it to become the exclusive property of theists. But when I interview scientists today, I find I have to be careful about using that term.

DA: I don't have any problem at all with religious language because I cherish the origins of religious terms. *Holy* we can trace all the way back to the Indo-European. It meant the healthy interrelatedness of all living things. From this we get our word *whole*. As a result, I have no trouble using a word like *holy* to describe a place in the wilderness where I might feel an intimate relationship with the cosmos.

CB: You use plenty of other such words, too. I recall *benediction*, *sacred*, even *prayer*—all these words come out in your essays. But the most striking religious term is the one you invented. Here it is in your chapter on the gravely endangered Short-tailed Albatross: "I go in part to stand witness. Life forms such as these need to be beheld and celebrated. That is my privilege as an earth ecstatic, but it is also my duty as a member of the species responsible for their destruction." *Earth ecstatic*: that's a fabulous identity to take on.

DA: It's a personal religion that fulfills me in countless ways. My creed is simple. I believe in the sanctity of life and the perfectibility of people.

Victor Weisskopf were among the signatories. The manifesto briefly recounted the story of escalating human impact on the environment. "We are close to committing—many would argue we are already committing—what in religious language is sometimes called 'crimes against creation'." Problems of such magnitude "must be recognized as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension... Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred." The thirty-two scientists thus appealed to the world religious community "to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as is required, to preserve the environment of the Earth."

The appeal was answered by several hundred religious leaders of all major faiths and from around the world. Thus arose a coalition, the Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment, coheaded by Carl Sagan and James Parks Morton, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. In 1991 the group declared that "the cause of environmental integrity and justice must occupy a position of utmost priority for people of faith." The coalition has since produced a number of aids for religious networking and for environmental education. The Joint Appeal, in turn, spurred the founding of a new organization: the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. This partnership includes national-level groups representing Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and even Evangelicals in the United States. It encourages each of the faiths to build an ecological component into their traditions, and then makes these products available to priests, rabbis, ministers, and other religious leaders.

In most quarters of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam it is still heresy to consider trees and frogs and the Earth itself as divine or as manifestations of divinity. Paganism and pantheism and all forms of nature worship are still scorned. Yet it is perfectly acceptable to regard the natural world—the creation (usually now the evolved creation)—as a sacred work of divinity. And we can then acknowledge our own negligence in failing to serve as good stewards of God's green Earth. The newly formed Evangelical Environmental Network, for example, came together as "a fellowship of Christians who know that the time has come for human creatures to honor the Creator and care for His good and glorious and beautiful creation." *Green Cross* (mentioned earlier) is the house organ of this group.

The greening of traditional religious faith is a hugely important component of the ecoreligious movement. But there are other ways, as well, to infuse ecological concern with a vision of the sacred. There are other ways to fill the perhaps innate drive for religious grounding with memes that can serve the Earth community.

The ecoreligious revolution is unfolding along five distinct—but not mutually exclusive—paths. These five may be called the way of reform (just discussed), the way of the ancients, the way of transcendence, the way of immersion, and the way of science.

Those who warm to the idea of worshipping Earth directly, rather than through a posited creator, can follow *the way of the ancients*. This path encompasses the nature religions of primary peoples everywhere and the revival of various forms of Earth goddess worship. Thus the attraction of Native American and Aboriginal Australian rites of passage and views of the sacred. Those who suffer "the accident of being born to a culture that separates nature and home," as Richard Nelson describes the modern pathos, need not relinquish their own

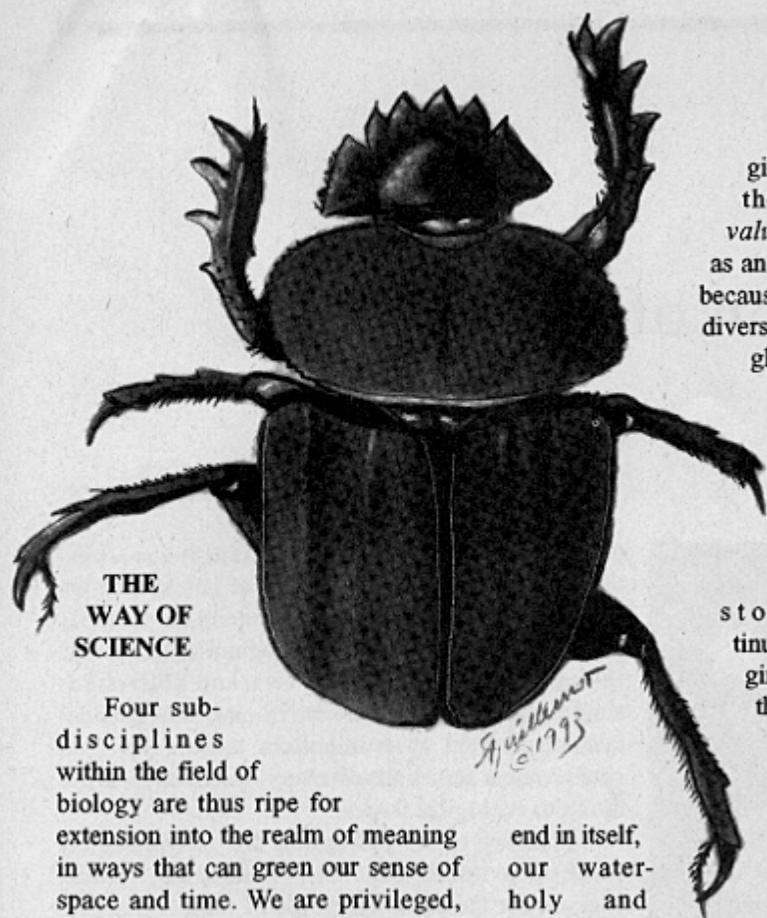
cultural heritage, however. By digging deeper into the past, we may find ancestral roots more to our liking. For those of European descent, Celtic rituals for marking the quarters and cross quarters of the calendar are becoming popular. For those looking to add a feminine aspect to the face of the divine, one can call up the goddess worshipped by Old World agriculturists long before the herders entered into covenant with Yahweh. For the descendants of the African diaspora, the practice of Yoruba is an option. Most important, beyond today's fashion for a back-to-the-genes sort of spiritual authenticity, Gary Snyder reminds us, "we are all indigenous to the planet."

Several widespread religions that are not "of the Book" don't require a lot of (if any) reform in order to embody an ecospiritual component. Buddhism and Taoism are commonly cited as examples. For these religions, divinity already is in everything; we just don't notice it. Meditative practice inspired by these and other Eastern religions is, however, sometimes viewed as narcissistic by action-oriented environmentalists, especially if the all-consuming goal is higher states of consciousness for oneself. Nevertheless, the *way of transcendence* has a long tradition in which success in communing with "the One" is then followed by a return to everyday life, with a new-found compassion for and urge to assist "the Many." Thich Nhat Hanh is a leader on this path. This Buddhist monk has been an inspiration to many in the ecospiritual movement, including Joanna Macy (who, with Australian John Seed, originated an ecological ritual for consciousness-raising called the Council of All Beings).

The *way of immersion* works through direct—even mystical—contact with nature. This form of ecospirituality is available to one and all, whether we have an immense wilderness at our doorstep, a treasured tree in an urban park, or just a chance, for a moment, to float with the clouds through a win-

dow. Something deep within us is brought into communion with the mountain, the tree, the cloud. Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, William Wordsworth were exemplars of this faith not long ago. Today Annie Dillard, Diane Ackerman, Barry Lopez, and Richard Nelson are among the growing family of storytellers and bards who offer us their own experiences. Their tales reach into our souls. We learn from these teachers how we mortals, too, might become spiritual beings, if only for a moment, by fully entering into the miracles routine in the world of nature. We can do it on foot or vicariously through *Desert Notes* or *The Moon by Whale Light*. The prophets of the way of immersion can urge us on, but each of us is deliciously on our own, as this is a doctrineless path.

Finally, there is the *way of science*. This path draws primarily from evolutionary biology, conservation biology, ecology, and geophysiology (global ecology). The more we learn about Earth and life processes, the more we are in awe, and the deeper the urge to revere the evolutionary forces that give time a direction and the ecological forces that sustain our planetary home. *Evolutionary biology* delivers an extraordinary gift: a myth of creation and continuity appropriate for our time. This is the grand sweep of the evolutionary epic that E.O. Wilson extols. Meanwhile, *conservation biology* introduces us to our farthest-flung kin, promoting knowledge and valuing of biodiversity throughout the world. We relish life in all its multifarious forms. *Ecology*, in turn, has a presence in the bioregional movement. Deep reverence is accorded the particular watersheds, nutrient cycles, and biological communities that are the lifeblood of particular human communities. Lastly, *geophysiology*, including Gaia theory, has reworked the biosphere into the most ancient and powerful of all living forms—something so much greater than the human that it can evoke a religious response.



THE WAY OF SCIENCE

Four sub-disciplines within the field of biology are thus ripe for extension into the realm of meaning in ways that can green our sense of space and time. We are privileged, through science, to know and witness the immense and fecund journey of life on Earth. Time thus becomes history, and history sacred story. We are privileged, through science, to augment folk wisdom of ecosystems and to begin to learn the physiology of the whole Earth, Gaia. Space thus becomes a cherished place: our bioregional and planetary home.

If a greening of perspective takes place at a very deep level within us, if we have "got religion," so to speak, then a whole new pathway opens for our environmental activism. However we may wish to marshal support for wild life and wild lands by speaking the language of human benefits and species rights, we can conclude our pleas with the simple refrain, "Because it is my religion." We can let our legislators know this. We can let our public lands administrators know this. We can let our neighbors know this. We can let one another know this.

We can thus begin to speak of the evolutionary value of lineages as an end in itself, because the evolutionary epic is our creation story. We can be-

gin to speak of the diversity value of species as an end in itself, because for us biodiversity is today's glorious manifestation of our sacred story and the only way to ensure that the story will continue. We can begin to speak of the bioregional value of intact ecosystems as an end in itself, our watery and fore be kept begin to speak of the gaian value of vast landscapes—of a coastal rim of life-supporting wetlands, of climate controlling forests—because for us Earth is our cherished home and we its indigenous peoples.

We can begin to work together to create the language through which these deepest convictions can be expressed, so that we too can be counted among the religious, so that our views too will be accorded respect and deference. Diane Ackerman—a poet, essayist, and naturalist who views herself as "deeply religious"—has invented a lovely term for her self-description. "I am an earth ecstatic," she witnesses in her latest literary book on endangered species, *The Rarest of the Rare*.

Earth ecstatic. I am becoming rather fond of that term. I think I will join you, Diane! And on issues concerning the Earth Community, we can stand together with people of all faiths whose religious convictions support a vision of humans in healthy and respectful relationship with the natural world. Count me, then, as part of the

Earth ecstatic denomination of what I hope will become the fastest-growing religious movement in America: the religious green. After all the deft (and essential) talk about ecosystem services and the medicine-chest value of species has played itself out, we can rise and witness with these simple words: Because it is my religion. |

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