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Hellfire and Brimstones:

Why Global Warming has Positioned Itself as a Religious Revolution

“It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of … vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty.”	"The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left."	**"The warnings … have been extremely clear for a long time. We are facing a … crisis. It is deepening. We are entering a period of consequences."**
Repent America	Isaiah 24: 5 -6	**Al Gore**

Leaving aside enormous differences in diction, the meaning at the heart of each of the messages above is the same: humans have brought terrible consequences upon themselves and the world they know. Why is it that the techniques used by the radically orthodox Christian group Repent America to instill panic in the hearts of the sinning and hell-bound majority of America are also used by Al Gore and his climate change activism cohorts? Each of these stances represents an adoption of religious language and metaphor for the purpose of motivating people to a cause that is less than religious.

Michael Hogue defines religion liberally, as something that “puts radical questions to life – questions that concern life’s meanings and purposes in reference to life’s foreground, background, and

distant horizon, questions that evoke the true fragility and contingency of life… A religious posture in life is one that attempts to see life in its largest possible context."1 Certainly, those at Repent America would have a different definition. However, Hogue strikes at the core of religious feeling. Religion is fundamentally a method of understanding the world around oneself, by placing oneself within a defined structure. The details of that structure vary: God, gods, goddesses, or none of the above.

In fact, at least since the time of Adam and Eve in the garden, experience in the natural world has functioned in a religious way, in granting people a sense of "awe and reverence, mystery and serenity," which traditional religions believe stem from encounters with God.2 People find solace and peace in the wilderness, and "as traditional religions revere those times when we are overwhelmed by the presence of God, or feel our ego dissolved in meditation, so people have for centuries acknowledged the power of nature to take them out of their normally constricted sense of self." 3A great number of prominent philosophers and poets - people like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir - have commented on the release and tranquility that the natural world affords them, in the experience of a sense of intimate relation to ones surroundings. Not only does experience in nature force one to consider one's place in the grand scheme, it also forces one to consider the make-up of the grand scheme itself. Outdoors, people question life's meaning and context. Experience in nature can be religious.

However, according to Gore and others, the natural world is undergoing a rapid transformation. Global warming, in posing a threat to humanity, has "magnified the real immediacy of life's precariousness," forcing many people to begin to reconsider their place in the larger context. Because people feel both culpable for and endangered by global warming, their previously secure status as masters over the natural world has come into question. Their lives have become "reoriented through recognition of the scale of the question of life," in much the same way that a religious convert's life

[1] Hogue, Michael S. "Global Warming and Religious Stick Fighting" *Crosscurrents*. Spring 2007. Pp. 116 -124.
[2] Gottlieb, Roger S. *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*. Oxford University Press, June 2006.
[3] *Ibid*.

would be, upon attaining a revelation or enlightenment.4 Religion and global warming share the unique quality of scale, and the ability to put human life in perspective.

A second characteristic shared by religion and global warming is uncertainty. While both provide a means by which to understand the world, neither is objectively verifiable. Given the enormous scale of the global warming problem, the complex interactions among all the planetary systems, and the uncertainty involved, it is understandable that some choose to approach it through all-inclusive structures borrowed from religion, since science has, thus far, failed to provide such a structure. Despite all the scientific investigation that has been devoted to unlocking the mechanisms behind global warming, even the most qualified of scientists can only come to an assertion of "99 percent confidence" regarding its existence and effects.5 This uncertainty in the science is due to the absolute singularity of the global warming problem; "there can be no science of a singularity, because science is in the business of generalization over repeatable situations."6 The fundamental process of scientific inquiry is the breaking down of objects and events into their simplest components. The qualities of these components are then observed under a variety of circumstances, until a general understanding of their behavior is reached. This process is contingent on experimentation, which is, in turn, contingent on repeatability. The process of global warming is not repeatable in any timeframe relevant to the current crisis. Science has gained comprehensive understanding of most of the individual processes involved, but remains unable to experiment with their interaction. Generalization, the ultimate goal of scientific inquiry, is impossible in the case of global warming.

The impossibility of generalization through experimentation poses problems for those who would have one believe the truth, or falsity for that matter, of the science behind global warming.

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[4] *Ibid*.

[5] NASA scientist Jim Hansen in testimony before Congress on June 23, 1988. Quoted in "Global Warming as mass Neurosis"

[6] Wood, David. "On Being Haunted by the Future." *Research in Phenomenology*, 36. Kominklijke Brill NV, The Netherlands, 2006. Pp. 274 – 296.

However, the possibility that global warming could have devastating consequences makes most people extremely uncomfortable with waiting for more conclusive evidence. This has led to the wide-spread adoption of the precautionary principle, which advocates, "acting to avoid serious or irreversible potential harm, despite lack of scientific certainty as to the likelihood, magnitude, or causation of that harm."7 The precautionary principle has been implemented in natural resource management and governance because it appeals to the human preference for guidelines, as opposed to spur-of-the-moment decisions, and making things up as they go. In lawmaking, it is imperative to set a standard of behavior. The precautionary principle provides a guideline and a standard of behavior. Because the science is inconclusive, and therefore fails to provide a guideline of its own, and because people would prefer to avoid causing harm to themselves or to future generations, they have chosen to act as though the current information regarding global warming is complete and accurate, as though its causes and effects were proven to be those hypothesized.

The application of the precautionary principle to global warming has placed the global warming ideology firmly within the realm of what W.S. Taylor calls "cult." He defines a cult as having two main characteristics, the "attitude of unhypothetical conviction," and the "interest to establish its own position."8 Cultists believe that their belief system "sprang full-blown into its proper shape," and that while it may grow, it will never be revised.9 The adoption of the precautionary principle by global warming theorists means that they accept current science as being fully knowledgeable regarding the causes and outcomes of climate change. They therefore both believe that global warming theory is in "its proper shape," and have an "attitude of unhypothetical conviction" regarding the science. They also seek to establish their own position through further scientific investigation, with the goal of better understanding of the phenomenon, as well as through public relations, with the aim of convincing

[7] http://www.pprinciple.net/the_precautionary_principle.html
[8] Taylor, W. S. "Science and Cult." Read at the Ninth International Congress of Psychology held at New Haven, Conn., September 4, 1929.
[9] *Ibid*.

people to change their lifestyles to mediate the problem. This is only natural, given the potentially enormous, irreversible consequences, but is nevertheless "cultish." The widespread adoption of the precautionary principle has caused global warming theory to take on characteristics of a cult.

The religious, cultish response to global warming among the majority of American people is relatively rational, given the scale of the problem and the uncertainty involved. Those who believe in the theory search for evidence to justify their belief and knowledge of how to ameliorate the problems. They take an example from religion, the only social structure on a similar scale, to guide their response. Many of the tropes of traditional religion have been adopted and advocated by global warming theorists. The "solutions offered to global warming involve radical changes to personal behavior, all of them with an ascetic, virtue-centric bent: drive less, buy less, walk lightly upon the earth."10 Such responses are borrowed from traditional religion; they are familiar responses to overwhelming problems.

While such changes seem familiar, having been preached for hundreds of years, they carry the potential for revolutionary outcomes as well. The cult of global warming theory has characteristics of David R. Loy's "salvation religion." While his argument is for the replacement of religion with capitalism in modern societies, his definitions fit global warming theory as well. He defines the "salvation religion" of capitalism as being "dissatisfied with the world as it is and compelled to inject a new promise into it, motivated (and justifying itself) by faith in the grace of profit and concerned to perpetuate that grace, with a missionary zeal to expand and reorder (rationalize) the economic system."11 Substituting for capitalism, global warming could be defined as a salvation religion. Global warming theorists are dissatisfied with the destruction of the natural world and are compelled to inject new promise into it, motivated and justifying themselves by faith in the grace of a stable environment and concerned to

[10] Stephens, Bret. "Global Warming as Mass Neurosis." Wall Street Journal, July 1, 2008. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121486841811817591.html

[11] Loy, David R. "The Religion of the Market." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 65/2*. http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/4999Ethics/Loy.pdf

perpetuate that grace, with a missionary zeal to minimize and reorder human interaction with that environment. Consider Al Gore, who is quoted as saying, "If we did not take action to solve this crisis, it could indeed threaten the future of human civilization. It sounds hard to accept. But again, we can solve it." Or Janet Holmes à Court, an Australian business woman and activist, who said, "We have to shift our emphasis from economic efficiency and materialism towards a sustainable quality of life and to healing of our society, of our people and our ecological systems." Certainly, these people, and others like them, exemplify dissatisfaction, motivation for change, faith in promise of a stable environment, and missionary zeal.

Just as certainly, Repent America represents a salvation religion, being dissatisfied with the number of sinners in America, advocating for their conversion, and having faith that such conversions will grant them reprieve from the "wrath" of God. So why has the scientifically-based theory of global warming come to represent itself in the manner of a salvation religion, of a cult? People respond, and they respond with emotion and money, the two tools absolutely necessary for instigating change. Already, Gore's pet project We (can solve the climate crisis), an organization to promote clean energy, has over two million subscribers.12 Since 2000, two and a half billion dollars of worth of products with the Energy Star label, denoting energy saving technology have been sold in the United States.13 Forty countries around the world have signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, recognizing the need for immediate action to combat climate change.14 Approaching the global warming problem using the structure provided by religion to bolster scientific opinion has proved wildly successful.

[12] http://www.wecansolveit.org/content/action/
[13] http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=join.join_index
[14] http://unfccc.int/parties_and_observers/items/2704.php

Loy suggests that the capitalist salvation religion led to a massive restructuring of the economic system, wherein people began to replace their faith in God with faith in the free market structure.15 Global warming salvation religion has the capacity to instigate a similar restructuring. Global warming activists push people to consume less in order to have a smaller impact on their environment. While as yet, the average consumer is still spending in an effort to "go green," buying the Energy Star products, for example, the ultimate goal of environmental activism is to reverse this trend. The quasi-religious requirements for smaller, less impactful lifestyles conflict directly with capitalist value of growth. If the success of the global warming activists continues at its present rate, growth will no longer be a measure of economic success or well-being.

Salvation religions have a long history of successful implementation of drastic change. Christianity, the first salvation religion, revolutionized thought in the 200s C.E. Capitalism revolutionized thought again in the Middle Ages. Global Warming is well on its way to revolutionizing thought now, by following in the hellfire-and-brimstones tradition of its forebears.

[15] Loy, David R. "The Religion of the Market." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 65/2*. http://www.colorado.edu/Economics/morey/4999Ethics/Loy.pdf