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The green fervour

Is environmentalism the new religion?

Joseph Breaun, National Post

In his new book *Apollo's Arrow*, ambitiously subtitled *The Science of Prediction and the Future of Everything*, Vancouver-based author and mathematician David Orrell set out to explain why the mathematical models scientists use to predict the weather, the climate and the economy are not getting any better, just more refined in their uncertainty.

What he discovered, in trying to sketch the first principles of prophecy, was the religious nature of modern environmentalism.

This is not to say that fearing for the future of the planet is irrational in the way supernatural belief arguably is, just that in its myths of the Fall and the Apocalypse, its saints and heretics, its iconography and tithing, its reliance on prophecy, even its schisms the green movement now exhibits the same psychology of compliance as religion.

Dr. Orrell is no climate-change denier. He calls himself green. But he understands the unjustified faith that arises from the psychological need to make predictions.

The track record of any kind of long-distance prediction is really bad, but everyone's still really interested in it. It's sort of a way of picturing the future. But we can't make long-term predictions of the economy, and we can't make long-term predictions of the climate, Dr. Orrell said in an interview. After all, he said, scientists cannot even write the equation of a cloud, let alone make a workable model of the climate.

Formerly of University College London, Dr. Orrell is best known among scientists for arguing that the failures of weather forecasting are not due to chaotic effects as in the butterfly that causes the hurricane but to errors of modelling. He sees the same problems in the predictions of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which he calls extremely vague, and says there is no scientific reason to think the climate is more predictable than the weather.

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Models will cheerfully boil away all the water in the oceans or cover the world in ice, even with pre-industrial levels of Co₂, he writes in *Apollo's Arrow*. And so scientists use theoretical concepts like flux adjustments to make the models agree with reality. When models about the future climate are in agreement, it says more about the self-regulating group psychology of the modelling community than it does about global warming and the economy.

In explaining such an arcane topic for a general audience, he found himself returning again and again to religious metaphors to explain our faith in predictions, referring to the weather gods and the images of almost biblical wrath in the literature. He sketched the rise of the gospel of deterministic science, a faith system that was born with Isaac Newton and died with Albert Einstein. He said his own physics education felt like an indoctrination into the use of models, and that scientists in his field, like priests... feel they are answering a higher calling.

If you go back to the oracles of ancient Greece, prediction has always been one function of religion, he said. This role is coveted, and so there's not very much work done at questioning the prediction, because it's almost as if you were going to the priest and saying, Look, I'm not sure about the Second Coming of Christ.

He is not the first to make this link. Forty years ago, shortly after Rachel Carson launched modern environmentalism by publishing *Silent Spring*, leading to the first Earth Day in 1970, a Princeton history professor named Lynn White wrote a seminal essay called *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*.

By destroying pagan animism [the belief that natural objects have souls], Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects, he wrote in a 1967 issue of *Daedalus*. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. It was a prescient claim. In a 2003 speech in San Francisco, best-selling author Michael Crichton was among the first to explicitly close the circle, calling modern environmentalism the religion of choice for urban atheists ... a perfect 21st century re-mapping of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths.

Today, the popularity of British author James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis—that the Earth itself functions as a living organism—confirms the return of a sort of idolatrous animism, a religion of nature. The recent IPCC report, and a week's worth of turgid headlines, did not create this faith, but certainly made it more evident.

It can be felt in the frisson of piety that comes with lighting an energy-saving light bulb, a modern votive candle.

It is there in the pious propaganda of media outlets like the *Toronto Star*, which on Jan. 28 made the completely implausible claim that, The debate about greenhouse gas emissions appears to be over.

It can be seen in the public ritual of cycling to work, in the veneer of saintliness on David Suzuki and Al Gore (the rush for tickets to the former vice-president's upcoming appearance crashed the server at the University of Toronto this week), in the high-profile conversion (honest or craven) of George W. Bush, and in the sinful

The green fervour—> Is environmentalism the new religion?

guilt of throwing a plastic bottle in the garbage.

Adherents make arduous pilgrimages and call them ecotourism. Newspapers publish the iconography of polar bears. The IPCC reports carry the weight of scripture.

John Kay of the Financial Times wrote last month, about future climate chaos: Christians look to the Second Coming, Marxists look to the collapse of capitalism, with the same mixture of fear and longing ... The discovery of global warming filled a gap in the canon ... [and] provides justification for the link between the sins of our past and the catastrophe of our future.

Like the tithes in Judaism and Christianity, the religiosity of green is seen in the suspiciously precise mathematics that allow companies such as Bullfrog Power or Offsetters to sell the supposed neutralization of the harmful emissions from household heating, air travel or transportation to a concert.

It is in the schism that has arisen over whether to renew or replace Kyoto, which, even if the scientific skeptics are completely discounted, has been a divisive force for environmentalists.

What was once called salvation—a nebulous state of grace—is now known as sustainability, a word that is equally resistant to precise definition. There is even a hymn, *When the North Pole Melts*, by James G. Titus, a scientist with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is not exactly *How Great Thou Art*, but serves a similar purpose.

Environmentalism even has its persecutors, embodied in the Bush White House attack dogs who have conducted no less than an Inquisition against climate scientists, which failed to bring them to heel but instead inspired potential martyrs. Of course, as religions tend to do, environmentalists commit persecution of their own, which has created heretics out of mere skeptics.

All of this might be fine if religions had a history of rational scientific inquiry and peaceful, tolerant implementation of their beliefs. As it is, however, many religions, environmentalism included, continue to struggle with the curse of literalism, and the resultant extremism.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think all this is wrapped up in our belief that we can predict the future, said Dr. Orrell. What we need is more of a sense that we're out of our depth, and that's more likely to promote a lasting change in behaviour.

Projections are useful to provoke ideas and aid thinking about the future, but as he writes in the book, they should not be taken literally.

The fundamental danger of deterministic, objective science [is that] like a corny, overformulaic film, it imagines and presents the world as a predictable object. It has no sense of the mystery, magic, or surprise of life.

The green fervour—> Is environmentalism the new religion?

The green fervour→ Is environmentalism the new religion?

The solution, he thinks, is to adopt what the University of Toronto's Thomas Homer-Dixon calls a prospective mind – an intellectual stance that is proactive, anticipatory, comfortable with change, and not surprised by surprise.

In short, if we are to be good, future problem solvers, we must not be blinded by prophecy.

I think [this stance] opens up the possibility for a more emotional and therefore more effective response, Dr. Orrell said. There's a sense in which uncertainty is actually scarier and more likely to make us act than if you have bureaucrats saying, Well, it's going to get warmer by about three degrees, and we know what's going to happen.