

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## The Chronicle Review

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#)



January 10, 2010

### Green Guilt

*By Stephen T. Asma*

Recently while I was brushing my teeth, my 6-year-old son scolded me for running the water too long. He severely reprimanded me, and at the end of his censure asked me, with real outrage, "Don't you love the earth?" And lately he has taken up the energy cause, scampering virtuously around the house turning off lights, even while I'm using them. He seems as stressed and anxious about the sins of environmentalism as I was about masturbation in the days of my Roman Catholic childhood.

Not too long ago, at a party, a friend confessed in a group conversation that he didn't really recycle. It was as if his casual comment had sucked the air out of the room—I think the CD player even skipped. He suddenly became a pariah. A heretic had been detected among the orthodox flock. During the indignant tongue-lashing that followed, people's faces twisted with moral outrage.

Many people who feel passionate about saving the planet justify their intense feelings by pointing to the seriousness of the problem and the high stakes involved. No doubt they are right about the seriousness. There are indeed environmental challenges, and steps must be taken to ameliorate them. But there is another way to understand the unique passion surrounding our need to go green.

Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to notice that religious emotions, like guilt and indignation, are still with us, even if we're not religious. He claimed that we were living in a post-Christian world—the church no longer dominates political and economic life—but we, as a culture, are still dominated by Judeo-Christian values. And those values are not obvious—they are not the Ten Commandments or any particular doctrine, but a general moral outlook.

You can see our veiled value system better if you contrast it with the one that preceded Christianity. For the pagans, honor and pride were valued, but for the Christians it is meekness and humility; for the pagans it was public shame, for Christians, private guilt; for pagans there was a celebration of hierarchy, with superior and inferior people, but for Christians there is egalitarianism; and for pagans there was more emphasis on justice, while for Christians there is emphasis on mercy (turning the other cheek). Underneath all these values, according to Nietzsche, is a kind of psychology—one dominated by resentment and guilt.

Every culture feels the call of conscience—the voice of internal self-criticism. But Western Christian culture, according to Nietzsche and then Freud, has conscience on steroids, so to speak. Our sense of guilt is comparatively extreme, and, with our culture of original sin and fallen status, we feel guilty about our very existence. In the belly of Western culture is the feeling that we're not worthy. Why is this feeling there?

All this internalized self-loathing is the cost we pay for being civilized. In a very well-organized society that protects the interests of many, we have to refrain daily from our natural instincts. We have to repress our own selfish, aggressive urges all the time, and we are so accustomed to it as adults that we don't always notice it. But if I was in the habit of acting on my impulses, I would regularly kill people in front of me at coffee shops who order elaborate whipped-cream mocha concoctions. In fact, I wouldn't bother to line up in a queue, but would just storm the counter (as I regularly witnessed people doing when I lived in China) and muscle people out of my way. But there is a small wrestling match that happens inside my psyche that keeps me from such natural aggression. And that's just morning coffee—think about how many times you'd like to strangle somebody on public transportation.

When aggression can't go out, then it has to go inward. So we engage in a kind of self-denial, or self-cruelty. Ultimately this self-cruelty is necessary and good for society—I cannot unleash my murderous tendencies on the whipped-cream-mocha-half-decaf latte drinkers. But my aggression doesn't disappear, it just gets beat down by my own discipline. Subsequently, I feel bad about myself, and I'm supposed to. Magnify all those internal daily struggles by a

hundred and you begin to see why Nietzsche thought we were always feeling a little guilty. But historically speaking we didn't really understand this complex psychology—it was, and still is, invisible to us. We just felt bad about ourselves, and slowly developed a theology that made sense out of it. God is perfect and pristine and pure, and we are sinful, unworthy maggots who defile the creation by our very presence. According to Nietzsche, we have historically needed an ideal God because we've needed to be cruel to ourselves, we've needed to feel guilty. And we've needed to feel guilty because we have instincts that cannot be discharged externally—we have to bottle them up.

Feeling unworthy is still a large part of Western religious culture, but many people, especially in multicultural urban centers, are less religious. There are still those who believe that God is watching them and judging them, so their feelings of guilt and moral indignation are couched in the traditional theological furniture. But increasing numbers, in the middle and upper classes, identify themselves as being secular or perhaps "spiritual" rather than religious.

Now the secular world still has to make sense out of its own invisible, psychological drama—in particular, its feelings of guilt and indignation. Environmentalism, as a substitute for religion, has come to the rescue. Nietzsche's argument about an ideal God and guilt can be replicated in a new form: We need a belief in a pristine environment because we need to be cruel to ourselves as inferior beings, and we need that because we have these aggressive instincts that cannot be let out.

Instead of religious sins plaguing our conscience, we now have the transgressions of leaving the water running, leaving the lights on, failing to recycle, and using plastic grocery bags instead of paper. In addition, the righteous pleasures of being more orthodox than your neighbor (in this case being more green) can still be had—the new heresies include failure to compost, or refusal to go organic. Vitriol that used to be reserved for Satan can now be discharged against evil corporate chief executives and drivers of gas-guzzling vehicles. Apocalyptic fear-mongering previously took the shape of repent or burn in hell, but now it is recycle or burn in the ozone hole. In fact, it is interesting the way environmentalism takes on

the apocalyptic aspects of the traditional religious narrative. The idea that the end is nigh is quite central to traditional Christianity—it is a jolting wake-up call to get on the righteous path. And we find many environmentalists in a similarly earnest panic about climate change and global warming. There are also high priests of the new religion, with Al Gore ("the Goracle") playing an especially prophetic role.

We even find parallels in environmentalism of the most extreme, self-flagellating forms of religious guilt. Nietzsche claims that religion has fostered guilt to such neurotic levels that some people feel culpable and apologetic about their very existence. Compare this with extreme conservationists who want to sacrifice themselves for trees and whales. And teachers, like myself, will attest to significant numbers of their students who feel that their cats or whatever are equal to human beings. And not only are members of the next generation egalitarian about all life, but they often feel positively awful about the way that their species has corrupted and defiled the whole beautiful symphony of nature. The planet, they feel, would be better off without us. We are not worthy. In this extreme form, one does not seek to reduce one's carbon footprint so much as eliminate one's very being.

Pointing out these parallels is not meant to diminish the environmental cause. We should indeed do the things in our power, and within reason, to sustain the planet. But we have a tendency to become neurotic and overly anxious, especially when we are regularly told, via green marketing ploys, that each one of us is responsible for the survival of the planet. That's a heavy guilt trip.

The same demographic group for whom religion has little or no hold (namely white liberals) turns out to be the most virulent champions of all things green. Is it possible that these folks must vent their moral spleen on environmentalism because they don't have all the theological campaigns (e.g., opposing gay marriage, opposing abortion, etc.) on which social conservatives exercise *their* indignation?

If environmentalism is a substitute for religion—a way of validating certain emotions—then we might expect to find other secular surrogates for guilt and indignation. Our tendencies to sin, repent, and generally indulge in self-cruelty can be seen cropping up in our

obsessions about health and fitness, for example. Struggling with our weight (diet and relapse) has risen above the other deadly sins to take a dominant position in our secular self-persecution. And our resentful aggression still manages to find some occasional pathways to the external world. We may not be able to punch the people we want to punch in real life, but we can turn some of our aggression outward at the reprobates of TV land. What a joyful hatred we all felt at the Octomom or Britney. It was a thoroughly cleansing bit of moral outrage. Or consider the inflamed moral drama for viewers of the *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* debacle. And more of this kind of indignation, previously reserved for religious condemnation, can be seen and heard everywhere on the screens and airwaves of the 24-hour "news" cycle. Large segments of the news seem calculated to facilitate the catharsis of our built-up resentment. Daytime talk shows and reality shows seem similarly designed to elicit our righteous anger. They form the other side of the religious coin—in addition to the self-cruelty of guilt, we can vent our aggression outwardly (like a crowd at a witch drowning) as long as it's justified by piety and the defense of virtue and orthodoxy.

Environmentalism is a much better hang-up than worrying about the spiritual pitfalls of too much masturbation. Even if it's neurotic, it's still doing some good. But environmentalism, like every other ism, has the potential for dogmatic zeal and obsession. Do we really need one more humorless religion? Let us save the planet, by all means. But let's also admit to ourselves that we have a natural propensity toward guilt and indignation, and let that fact temper our fervor to more reasonable levels.

*Stephen T. Asma is a professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago. His books include *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Why I Am a Buddhist* (Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2010).*

Copyright 2011. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037