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May 27, 2008: Environmentalism as the New Religion of Secularism

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Title: Environmentalism as the New Religion of Secularism

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5/27/2008--In the June 12, 2008 issue of the New York Review of Books, Freeman Dyson reminds us of the danger of religion when it addresses less than the ultimate—the danger of religion as idolatry. Dyson is Emeritus Professor of Physics at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. In the magazine, he is discussing books that suggest things that can be done about global warming that fall short of world-wide, revolutionary change: for example, enhanced carbon eating trees. Dyson believes such solutions are possible, but his deeper point is that environmentalists cannot believe this, do not permit themselves to even think about such things: "All the books that I have seen about the science and economics of global warming, including the two books under review, miss the main point. The main point is religious rather than scientific. There is a worldwide secular religion which we may call environmentalism, holding that we are stewards of the earth, that despoiling the planet with waste products of our luxurious living is a sin, and that the path of righteousness is to live as frugally as possible. The ethics of environmentalism are being taught to children in kindergartens, schools, and colleges all over the world. Environmentalism has replaced socialism as the leading secular religion. And the ethics of environmentalism are fundamentally sound. Scientists and economists can agree with Buddhist monks and Christian activists that ruthless destruction of natural habitats is evil and careful preservation of birds and butterflies is good. The worldwide community of environmentalists—most of whom are not scientists—holds the moral high ground, and is guiding human societies toward a hopeful future. Environmentalism, as a religion of hope and respect for nature, is here to stay. This is a religion that we can all share, whether or not we believe that global warming is harmful."But, Dyson says, this religion has its faith claims, like all religions, and these claims prevent us from rationally addressing our environmental problems. Whatever you may think of carbon-eating trees, secularism is certainly prey to this sort of idol worship. This is what the New Atheists do not understand. Societies will have religion. If those religions worship less than the ultimate--whether it is nationalism or consumerism or whatever—the results are destructive. Hallowed Secularism is an attempt to recognize this and to address it. It aims to reintroduce the ultimate, as secularism understands it.