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On Sacred or Secular Ground? Callicott and Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT

In *Earth's Insights* Baird Callicott develops a science-based but religiously influenced global environmental ethics that attempts to resolve the relationships between science, religion, and morality. He proposes to privilege science and relegate religion to a supportive and corrective role in environmental ethics. I argue, on the contrary, that a rationally compelling environmental ethics is dependent on religion and that, ironically, the only way to resolve conundrums regarding science, religion, and morality, is to stand environmental ethics on sacred ground.

A SCIENTIFIC GROUND FOR A UNIVERSAL ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

For some time now I have been in full flight from theology, focusing my analytical energies on grassroots environmental movements globally (e.g., Taylor 1995). So it is with no small irritation that I am compelled to ruminate on Baird Callicott's *Earth's Insights*. In ironic ways, this work resurrects issues long banished from my mind.

Although much of *Earth's Insights* is devoted to mining the world's diverse religious traditions for their possible contributions to environmental ethics, the heart of the volume's *constructive* effort is found in his chapter entitled 'A Postmodern Evolutionary Ethic'. Callicott argues that deconstructive postmodernism's anti-foundational strategy cannot provide a compelling environmental ethics and therefore, a new master narrative is needed; one based on the emerging evolutionary-ecological worldview and a corresponding Land Ethic.

Callicott derives his evolutionary land ethic in a secular and provocative way, fusing Darwin, Hume, Smith, and Leopold to contemporary sociobiology,

creating a novel 'theory of moral sentiments'. Here morality is seen as an evolutionary adaptation favouring social cohesion and survival (1994: 202). With Leopold (who was drawing heavily on Darwin), Callicott views the extension of moral considerability to the environment as a rational deduction based partly on the ecological insight that 'the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts' (Leopold in Callicott 1994: 204, Leopold 1966: 239).

In a more recent article, Callicott further clarifies his views in juxtaposition with what he calls 'the current deconstructive turn in ecology' (1996: 356). He does so by modifying Leopold's ethical maxim from – 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise' – to 'A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends to otherwise' (1995: 372). This modification does make the land ethic cohere more closely with contemporary ecological science, which increasingly downplays or dismisses 'community' and 'balance of nature' ecosystem models for newer paradigms viewing ecosystems as 'mere transient assemblages' of species that are 'individualistically adapted' to various places at different times (1995: 361).

This recasting is a good example of how one can seek a secular ground for environmental ethics. Nevertheless, Callicott does not abandon religion. Rather, he draws it into his ethics by revisiting the old conundrum about the relationship between religion and morality, but with a new twist. He asks implicitly, What is the relationship between a *scientifically derived evolutionary ethics* – and the world's various religious ethics – especially with regard to our obligations toward the natural world? His answer provides the key to his constructive effort.

Although Callicott affirms every religious tradition as valuable in its own right and believes they can all contribute to environmental ethics, he forthrightly argues that the evolutionary-ecological worldview must have primacy. Only an evolutionary-ecological worldview, malleable and evolving with the best available science, can provide a standard for assessing the credibility of other worldviews, including religious ones. Only such a worldview has the potential for becoming 'a universal environmental ethic', because only science is on its way to acquiring 'globally acceptable credentials' (1994: 188).¹ Just such a universal ethic is needed, Callicott claims, 'to avoid balkanizing environmental philosophy', to overturn the unceasing conflict promised by deconstructive postmodernism, and to clear the ideological way for the 'mutual understanding and cooperation' that is a prerequisite to an effective environmental action (1994: 186).

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RELIGION'S SUPPORTING ROLE

Religion, in Callicott's scheme, is secondary yet important: it can suggest and illuminate anomalous evidence to be considered and thereby correct and complement the evolutionary-scientific worldview; and it can contribute 'symbols, images, metaphors, ... stories, and myths' to help articulate and promote this worldview (1994: 192). Callicott even invites the proponents of religious worldviews to 'be co-creators' of the needed, global environmental ethics (1994: 192).

Understandably, many will be suspicious of this offer. Deconstructive Postmodernism has analysed brilliantly the power relations in science, scrutinising the ends toward which it has been employed, assessing whose interests it serves. Certainly less science than is commonly assumed deserves the label 'objective' (Hayles 1995)² and surely we should be mindful of the many examples where scientists have, wittingly and not, injuriously exploited peoples and ecosystems. Some critics will no doubt find in Callicott's invitation a certain elitist presumption: How nice that he and his scientist-friends have invited the rest of us to the table, yes to be taken seriously, so long as our perceptions cohere with theirs!

Despite this problematic implication, much of Callicott's logic is inescapable: To deserve 'intellectual allegiance', worldviews must 'accommodate the full range of human experience', they 'are subject to rational criticism and comparative epistemological evaluation', and 'one worldview may consistently comprehend more of human experience than another' (1994: 190). Such an approach views truth as something always tentatively embraced, as resulting from a dynamic process open to revision. It views truths not merely as idea-complexes fashioned to promote somebody's interests,³ as many postmodernists would have it.⁴

The main outline of Callicott's argument here makes sense: we ought to highly value the scientific method's 'skepticism and faultfinding'; and this does provide a strong rationale for privileging the scientific worldview.⁵ Does not such a dynamic approach to knowledge well-reflect our own process of inquiry at its best and most open?⁶

In the last analysis, and contrary to Postmodernism's 'erasure of the rational human subject' (e.g. Lyotard 1984) ordinary people do use rational templates to evaluate competing worldviews (Toulmin 1970; Soulé 1995: 151-53) and the scientific method is an appropriate tool for doing precisely that.⁷

I also like Callicott's general suggestion that we 'try to bring the intellectual elements of the earth's many indigenous cultural traditions into a complementary and concordant relationship with ... [contemporary] science' (1994: 210), even though this requires further elaboration, and might even be perceived as patronising. I especially like his idea if by it he means that we should seek a

‘critical correlation’ between our own affective and other life-experiences (including what we learn scientifically), and that of our world’s religious traditions.⁸ This might even allow our affective and spiritual lives to challenge scientific tenets, including those predicated on or postulating a disenchanted world. This might even empower us to perceive where the sacred may be revealed through the sciences themselves.

Hopefully the preceding analysis will help make intelligible the following reservations.

Reservation One: About Terminology

Callicott once suggested we must give the ‘Deconstructive Devil its due’;⁹ and I agree that we should adopt its sceptical attitude toward emancipatory narratives and truth claims. But by labeling his own emerging position a ‘postmodern environmental ethic’, one might conclude that Callicott has sold this Devil his soul. This is not the case, however, for he rejects the main streams of postmodern criticism, making his adoption of the label puzzling.

He tries to resolve the confusion by distinguishing between a ‘nihilistic and cynical’ *deconstructive postmodernism* and a ‘creative and optimistic’ *reconstructive postmodernism*. The idea of a ‘postmodern science’ however, upon which Callicott implicitly stands this distinction, is untenable. In recent decades the sophistication but not the method of science has been altered, and since the word modern refers to ‘recent’ or ‘present’ times, it makes little sense to call recent scientific understandings ‘postmodern’ – even if such understandings have displaced the substantive paradigms of the early scientific era. Cartesian dualism and Baconian mechanism are not endemic to science, indeed, they are being transcended by the scientific method itself. If what we really want is for good modern science to inform our moral theories and choices, it would be clearer to refer simply to ‘modern’ or ‘contemporary’ science. We can take a sceptical view of grandiose enlightenment claims without capitulating to the postmodern fashion, adopting its terminology, or locating ourselves within its own emancipatory narrative, that of elite-intellectuals liberating the gullible from their naive hopes and ideals.¹⁰ Callicott should jettison the term.

Reservation Two: About the Respective Roles of Science and Religion

Callicott recognises that ‘purely secular programs ... aimed at environmental conservation may remain ineffective unless the environmental ethics latent in traditional worldviews animate and reinforce them’ (1994: 234, cf. Leopold 1971: 246). Yet he still privileges science and relegates religion to a supporting role. My second reservation addresses this priority.

I agree with Callicott that the quest for a rationally plausible universal environmental ethic is a valuable endeavour, and I think his scientifically-

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updated land ethic provides a big step in the right direction. I also think that, for pragmatic political reasons, it makes sense to labour toward rational and secular environmental ethics around which modern people can organise, whatever the extent of their religiosity. But I do *not* find Callicott's naturalistic,¹¹ evolutionary-scientific worldview *existentially compelling*, ironically, because an environmental ethics based wholly on science is insufficiently *religious* to be *rationally* persuasive.¹²

My reasoning here begins with a scientific proposition about which there is little doubt: in about five billion years the sun will expand and incinerate life on earth. This poses inconvenient and little-asked questions, such as: If the demise of life on earth is likely, if not guaranteed, why value it? Does it really matter if humans and their planetary fellow-travellers, for a time, are 'successful' in their evolutionary unfolding? Does it really make sense to affirm that, 'life and its processes have value' if soon they will perish?¹³

When I venture to raise such doubts within green subcultures, the answers are usually evasive, sometimes circular; for example, 'We value the earth and its processes, so they must be valuable.' Of course, such responses beg the question by conflating fact and value, trying to derive a moral principle – 'people ought to respect the evolutionary process' – from the fact that some people do. The question remains as to whether this is justifiable.

Still other times, the reply is impatient, 'the demise of planetary life is so far-off, and the environmental crisis so dire, that we ought not waste time troubling ourselves about distant threats.' This may buy us a little time but not much. Non-anthropogenic threats to the diversity of life may not be distant, but imminent, *inbound, with the next, sufficiently large asteroid*. Of course, it does not really matter if the extinction of life on earth is soon or far-off; all 'environmental ethics' are predicated upon the conviction that the life in and around us *is valuable*, in some way. What sense does this make if life is to disappear – especially if no one remains to value it – even if only to appreciate, afterward, the tragic aesthetics of this bygone evolutionary story?

This is why I do not find Callicott's constructive ethics existentially compelling: Even though I find many of his deductions from contemporary science plausible – and even though I am sympathetic to his project – a scientifically-privileged, cosmological narrative of impending *ecocide* does not inspire me to an ethics of care for earthly life-processes. Nor does it inspire me to concrete environmental action in defence of these processes, or convince me to promote a universal land ethic. This story leads me, rather, to a disempowering despair and sense of futility. It tempts me to relax my struggle to live more simply, to withdraw into a small circle of family and friends and revel in the places I love (for no discernible or compelling good reason), in short, it tempts me to become a hedonist and live for the passing pleasures of the moment.¹⁴

Perhaps our valuing of friends and families, and at our best, of the natural world, provides sufficient ingredients for cooking-up the needed environmental

ethics. Perhaps this is how Callicott would reply to such existential despair. Indeed, this seems to be a part of what he is saying, echoing sociobiology: Ethics requires no deity, our DNA proves we have all evolved from a common ancestor, therefore all species *are* related, and this alone can provide an ample basis for obligations to them. He writes, for example, 'The idea that all extant species, including *Homo sapiens*, are descended from one Urform or from very few such forms is not in doubt. Hence, human beings are a part of nature, and we are kin—literally, though more or less distantly kin—to all other kinds of life' (1996: 362; see also 1989: 129-174).¹⁵

Such a recognition can, as Callicott suggests, lead us toward felt obligations to our genetic relations; different ones, to be sure, depending upon how close to us they may be, in various ways (Callicott 1996: 364). But the existence of felt duties does not logically require us to believe that such obligations make sense. This presents another form of the is-ought problem. Why assume, even if life-forms are genetically related, and even if some people value them, that respect for such life is morally obligatory? Perhaps it is presumptuous, even anthropocentric, to assume that because humans tend to value those they consider their kin (at least their closest relatives), that such kin are actually valuable. Put more starkly, just because we may like, appreciate, and wish to protect someone or something does not mean they are valuable. That there are usually others who do not share such value preferences certainly underscores the problem.

If I may hazard a conclusion, then, it is this: *the only way to resolve these conundrums is to stand environmental ethics on sacred ground.*¹⁶ It is highly ironic that this claim — that earth ethics are inescapably dependent on religion — is based on a rational deduction from contemporary cosmological science. Yet the dependence of morality on religion is the only plausible way to resolve the motivation question regarding why people should adopt a moral point of view toward earthly life, particularly in the light of its apparent, impending doom.

In my judgement, only when we perceive that the value of the living natural world is grounded in something greater than ourselves, in something other than our human ability to value it, will our rational capacities be satisfied fully that life on earth matters.¹⁷ This claim is compatible with many religious perceptions — monisms, polytheisms, monotheisms, pantheisms, polytheisms, animisms — it can withstand scrutiny whether there is a personal God, or if the divine is conceived as an impersonal cosmic presence, or if the land is inspirited with each earthly entity participating in and expressing the divine.

Even though I consider a religious worldview essential for a compelling environmental ethics — however — most days I am agnostic. Yet I also have deep, affective experiences of the value of people, of our earthy home, of our miraculous kindred relations. These experiences are meaningless in the absence of the sacred, and yet *they are as convincing as what I know scientifically.* In the final analysis we must choose — either to believe in a fascinating but meaningless

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universe – or in one congruent with our own experiences of the value of people and place.

Choosing is difficult. Yet, I am compelled by my own affective life, my aesthetic preferences, by a few moments in nature that are beyond words, to affirm that it all matters. I am not sure of much, but I am sure of this. I may not be a person fuelled with an everyday mystical sense of unity with the universe, by contacts with nature-spirits – let alone by contacts with a pantheon or personal god that consecrates the earth through creative fiat. In my own quasi-agnostic way, I must *resolve* to believe in the sacred, because it makes good sense, because it coheres with my experience of the value that surrounds me, because when I am at my most perceptive, it rings true. I must also nurture this fragile conviction.

I doubt there is much in all this from which Callicott would demur.¹⁸ My experience has been that, when one pokes passionate greens deeply enough, underneath you find a sense of the sacred. This was true with Leopold¹⁹ – Callicott is his progeny – is it true for him too?

PLANETARY CIVIC RELIGION AS EMANCIPATORY NARRATIVE

Perhaps it is possible to privilege science for some purposes and religion for others. Science could contribute to moral theories and help arbitrate truth claims; it could be employed in policy making venues to make specific arguments about how best to conserve diversity; it could help demonstrate the exigent circumstances that can make justifiable direct-action resistance against the exploitation of species. As I argued previously, science can also convince us of the necessity to posit a sacred ground to explain our affective experiences of the value of earthly life (Maguire 1978; Ogden 1963). Meanwhile, such a religious reverence for life can empower social movements toward both ecological and social justice.

Indeed, such a perception can foster the emergence of an ‘earth nationalism’ or ‘planetary civic religion’ (Deudney 1993, 1995, 1996), fed by plural religious tributaries, all viewing the earth as sacred, considering it worthy of the venerating act of *conservation*. Callicott himself acknowledges that the perception of sacred space has a cross-cultural currency (1994: 155), but he does not make enough of this. I am suggesting that this perception could have globally acceptable credentials as or more important as science for building a global environmental ethics.

Despite the perils of religion in general and earth religion in particular (Deudney 1995; Stark 1995; Zimmerman 1994), a pluralistic earth religion, based on a minimum common denominator that affirms the entire earth and its processes as ‘sacred’ (Gottlieb 1996), one that is informed and shaped by the best available science, one that respects cultural diversity as part of the sacred whole

and allows many expressions and viewpoints about how to proceed – such a universal religious environmental ethics might not be either pernicious, or merely a utopian fantasy. Perhaps such a planetary civic religion could evolve and become Callicott's envisioned, 'master narrative for the rainbow race of the global village' (1994: 192). An emerging planetary civic religion might even be the kind of emancipatory narrative with which we and our diverse relatives can live.

NOTES

¹ Conservation biologist Michael Soulé is cautiously optimistic about the possibility of universal understandings based on human rational capacities, noting that 'Detailed aboriginal or folk taxonomies recognise the same species as do those of Western biologists. To me this suggests that cultural determinism is less important than the structure of the human sensory/perceptual apparatus ...' (1995: 153).

² Hayles (1995) cites Sandra Harding (1992) arguing that many scientists are not 'objective enough' to acknowledge how their own embodiment, situatedness, and interactivity influences perception. She proposes that rather than objectivity we should stress 'interactivity' as a necessary precursor to acquiring any knowledge, and that a 'constrained constructivism' provides a way to tentatively value scientific knowledge. Compare her 'moderate deconstructionist view' with Borgman, Worster and Soulé (esp. pps. 148-150) in Soulé and Lease (1995).

³ Callicott overstates his case slightly when he complains that 'deconstructive postmodernism thinks that all religious and philosophical worldviews are fabricated to justify the power of a dominant elite' (1994: 184). Foucault, for example, has a more relational view of power than this implies, seeing worldviews as also being created or resisted by non-elites in their negotiations and struggles over power; worldviews, consequently, do not only serve the interests of elite groups.

⁴ This approach might even satisfy an environmental philosopher like Michael Zimmerman (1994) who has been deeply influenced by postmodern theory and wants to ensure an ongoing process whereby all parties can 'contest earth's future' without any party gaining hegemony.

⁵ Michael Soulé (1995: 153) cites Latour (1987) in acknowledging that scientists 'are subject to fashion, bias, and ambition', but insightfully qualifies this recognition: 'It is easy to confuse the behavior of individual scientists with the behavior of the institution of science. Science, as an institution, is self-corrective. Science episodically but ultimately undermines the interests and even the beliefs of its own adherents. Thus, the Postmodern premise that individuals cannot escape from their values or from their expectations about reality is fair, but it sticks only to scientists, not science' (1995: 154). Soulé also cites Stephen Jay Gould on this matter: 'The factual correction of error may be the most sublime event in intellectual life, the ultimate sign of our necessary obedience to a larger reality and our inability to construct the world according to our desires. For science, in particular, factual correction holds a specially revered place for two reasons: first, because we define the enterprise as learning more and more about an external reality: second, because we know in our hearts that we can be as stubborn and resistant to change as petty bureaucrats and fundamentalist preachers – and undeniable factual correction therefore

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becomes a kind of salvation from our own emotional transgressions against a shared ideal' (Gould 1993: 452, in Soulé 1995: 154). See Gould (1997) for his traditional argument that 'science and religion are not in conflict, for their teachings occupy distinctly different domains'.

⁶ It is also worth noting that the proffered scientific method (if scrupulously followed) contrasts favourably with the epistemological approach of much religious enterprise, where those responsible for religious production and maintenance seek to annihilate evidence at variance with their own worldviews (Berger and Luckmann 1966) which, generally speaking, usually promotes the material and status interests of their own primary producers.

⁷ Moreover, speaking practically from a perspective valuing biodiversity, what is needed is not a rejection of science (because it has paved the way for destructive technologies), but rather a greater reliance on good science in the quest for conservation (Soulé 1995). The technological horse is out of the barn and we must cope with it; for a helpful discussion see Rothenberg (1993).

⁸ The term 'critical correlation' is borrowed by David Tracy (1978). This notion inspired but broadens his idea, for as a Roman Catholic priest, he was working primarily toward points of congruence between his tradition and other experiences, whereas I am operating in with more pluralistic presuppositions.

⁹ On the back jacket of Soulé and Lease (1995).

¹⁰ For discussions of Postmodernism as metanarrative see Habermas (1987) and Norris (1990).

¹¹ Although Callicott is convinced that value resides in the human evaluator, not in some value held by natural processes that are independent of the human evaluator, it seems to me that, nevertheless, his attempt to ground ethics in science is a kind of naturalism or natural law theory. After all, his constructive effort utilises science to understand the natural world and derive prescriptions from it. The problem with such naturalism, of course, is the naturalistic fallacy, the logical difficulty of deriving an ought from an is, a value from a fact. (See Callicott's discussion; 1982, reprinted 1989: 117-127, as well as 1995: 127, for his discussion of Clifford Gertz's views on the commonality of people deriving ought from is). But as Callicott argues, and as I do here but differently, there are reasonable responses to it. For a good introduction to such issues see Frankena (1963: esp. 197-102).

¹² Although this line of discussion reflects a personal conundrum, it is not merely idiosyncratic. Those promoting the defense of biological diversity are asking people to make what many of them consider to be significant risks or sacrifices; the poor may be asked to leave aside a food-source, at least for a time, until practices for its sustainable harvesting are established, and the affluent must be asked to dramatically reduce their rates of consumption. Neither are likely to do so if such sacrifices are uninformed by deeply-held values.

¹³ It is inconsequential whether this purported value is based on human needs.

¹⁴ I have noticed, incidentally, that those in the deep ecology movement who celebrate the evolutionary story in narrative, poem and ritual, as a way to evoke and deepen ecological concern, usually bring the story into the present, honouring those engaged in the real pro-life resistance. They may celebrate the expanding universe – but never the expanding sun – they never recite the story to end, for this would raise the specter of futility. For examples see Seed et al. (1988: 45-51) and Swimme and Berry (1992: 241-278). For discussions of related ritualising within the deep ecology movement, see Taylor (1993 & 1994).

¹⁵ For this he cites Michael Soulé's kindred proclamation, 'There is now no question that all life on earth evolved from a common ancestor. The genetic material and the codes embedded within it reveal that every living kind of plant and animal owes its existence to a single-celled ancestor that evolved some three and a half billion years ago. All species are kin' (1995: 142). Compare with Kellert and Wilson (1993), Kellert (1995), and *Earth First!* advocate Manes (1990: 142).

¹⁶ I mean 'sacred' in this general sense which is open to great pluralism in particulars: 'entitled to veneration or religious respect by association with divinity or divine things; holy'. (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary, 1989, see also Smith and Green 1995: 943-948).

My discussion here of the rational necessity of religion for a scientifically based, naturalistic ethics, is heavily influenced by those who have argued that for such ethics to be plausible, some metaphysical premise is assumed or implied. For a lucid introduction see J. P. Crossley, Jr. (1978 and 1981). Drawing on Schliermacher (1928) and others, Crossley argues that 'the religious experience of gratitude and the moral experience of obligation have the same root', namely the affective experience of being dependent on and obligated to something prior to our own experiences. See also Ogden (1963), Toulmin (1970), d'Entreves (1970), and Phillips (1966). For an argument similar to Callicott's, that religion can enrich ethics by providing clarifying alternatives and motivations for action, see Ramsey (1966), and for an argument that morality is logically independent of religion, see Nielson (1966).

¹⁷ Callicott and some other philosophers posit that the natural world is valuable apart from its usefulness to humans, and yet argue that such value depends on the existence of a valuer (1989: 151-53, originally in Callicott 1986). Put differently, the value of nature does not inhere to nature itself or in its usefulness for human purposes, but it does depend on the presence of a valuer. This makes much good sense, and I see little way around it. But if true, then it seems to buttress my argument that environmental ethics requires a sacred ground, especially if the valuers who presently exist (humans and possibly some other animals) will eventually become extinct. Unless, of course, we are willing to argue that things only matter as long as we and other valuing life-forms exist. I am arguing here, however, that this is not a very compelling basis for claiming that life really does matter. Interestingly, Callicott's rejection of views in which the value of nature inheres to nature itself may logically infer an ethics dependent, not only on sacred ground, but upon a form of the divine that is, in some way, personal. Otherwise, how could there be a beyond-this-life valuer.

One way to address the difficulty of providing a sacred grounding for environmental ethics, and simultaneously a personal divine valuer, is through a panentheistic process philosophy: humans and other life forms are a part of and participate in the divine cosmos. We influence its direction and it us. We are not to this divine cosmos as servants to masters, rather, we are to it more as fish to a divine cosmic ocean. See Jay McDaniel (1994) for this metaphor and his Panentheistic metaphysics, comparing Griffin (1994).

For the emerging consensus about the terms intrinsic value – 'the value of an object which is independent of the presence of valuer' and inherent value – value which requires the presence of a valuer', see Armstrong and Botzler (1993: 53) and Callicott (1989: 161, or 1985).

¹⁸ For example, Callicott rejects anthropocentrism (1994: 206), and praises a variety of ecological resistance movements (1994: 211-234). For a global panorama of such movements, see Taylor (1995).

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¹⁹I confirmed this during a dinner conversation with Callicott and Curt Meine, Leopold's biographer, during a conversation in late 1995. Shortly before he died, when pressed by his daughter, Leopold confided that he was something of a pantheist. For more evidence of Leopold's Pantheism, see Callicott 1995: 42-43.

Even Bill Cronon, who has been much criticised by some deep ecologists for promoting an anti-wilderness 'social construction of nature' perspective (see 1995), recently proclaimed defensively that wilderness is his religion (see 1996: 56-57).

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