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Warming as Mass Neurosis

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Last week marked the 20th anniversary of the mass hysteria phenomenon known as global warming. Much of the science has since been discredited. Now it's time for political scientists, theologians and psychiatrists to weigh in.

What, discredited? Thousands of scientists insist otherwise, none more noisily than NASA's Jim Hansen, who first banged the gong with his June 23, 1988, congressional testimony (delivered with all the modesty of "99% confidence").



But mother nature has opinions of her own. NASA now begrudgingly confirms that the hottest year on record in the continental 48 was not 1998, as previously believed, but 1934, and that six of the 10 hottest years since 1880 antedate 1954. Data from 3,000 scientific robots in the world's oceans show there has been slight cooling in the past five years, never mind that "80% to 90% of global warming involves heating up ocean waters," according to a report by NPR's Richard Harris.

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The New True Believers

The Arctic ice cap may be thinning, but the extent of Antarctic sea ice has been expanding for years. At least as of February, last winter was the Northern Hemisphere's coldest in decades. In May, German climate modelers reported in the journal *Nature* that global warming is due for a decade-long vacation. But be not not-afraid, added the modelers: The inexorable march to apocalypse resumes in 2020.

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This last item is, of course, a forecast, not an empirical observation. But it raises a useful question: If even slight global cooling remains evidence of global warming, what *isn't* evidence of global warming? What we have here is a unfalsifiable hypothesis, logically indistinguishable from claims for the existence of God. This doesn't mean God doesn't exist, or that global warming isn't happening. It does mean it isn't science.

So let's stop fussing about the interpretation of ice core samples from the South Pole and temperature readings in the troposphere. The real place where discussions of global warming belong is in the realm of belief, and particularly the motives for belief. I see three mutually compatible explanations.

The first is as a vehicle of ideological convenience. Socialism may have failed as an economic theory, but global warming alarmism, with its dire warnings about the consequences of industry and consumerism, is equally a rebuke to capitalism. Take just about any other discredited leftist nostrum of yore – population control, higher taxes, a vast new regulatory regime, global economic redistribution, an enhanced role for the United Nations – and global warming provides a justification. One wonders what the left would make of a scientific "consensus" warning that some looming environmental crisis could only be averted if every college-educated woman bore six children: Thumbs to "patriarchal" science; curtains to the species.

A second explanation is theological. Surely it is no accident that the principal catastrophe predicted by global warming alarmists is diluvian in nature. Surely it is not a coincidence that modern-day environmentalists are awfully biblical in their critique of the depredations of modern society: "And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart." That's Genesis, but it sounds like Jim Hansen.

And surely it is in keeping with this essentially religious outlook that the "solutions" chiefly 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 and so on. A light carbon footprint has become the 21st-century equivalent of sexual abstinence.

Finally, there is a psychological explanation. Listen carefully to the global warming alarmists, and the main theme that emerges is that what the developed world needs is a large dose of penance. What's remarkable is the extent to which penance sells among a mostly secular audience. What is there to be penitent about?

As it turns out, a lot, at least if you're inclined to believe that our successes are undeserved and that prosperity is morally suspect. In this view, global warming is nature's great comeuppance, affirming as nothing else our guilty conscience for our worldly success.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James distinguishes between healthy, life-affirming religion and the monastically inclined, "morbid-minded" religion of the sick-souled. Global warming is sick-souled religion.

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