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By Richard Gallagher

EDITORIAL

Zealots for Science

Being mindful of the extremes, science can remain a pursuit of reality.

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Most of the people with whom I interact socially don't have a science background, and it's hard not to notice that the majority have a world-view rather at odds with mine. Up until now I have written this off as the gentle slide into grumpy old-manhood and tried to avoid thinking about it, but reading Lee Silver's feature on [page 48](#) made me realize that it's more than that.

Silver focuses on the widespread concept of Mother Nature as a benevolent super-system that nurtures and shelters all life forms. He points out the dangerous mindset that secretly takes root from this seemingly harmless belief: If Mother Nature is always good - attaching "good" and "bad" notions to it at all is symptomatic of the problem - then human interference is bad. And more subtly and as



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misguided, anything "natural" must be good. What I come up against are the practical spinoffs of this belief, among them a devotion to all things organic, an embracing of holistic therapies, and support for rights equal to those of humans for all animals.

These ideas are invariably presented in an open, friendly, unthreatening way, and they have an immediate easygoing appeal that is lacking in the sterner, more rigid religions. There's an invented tradition, as well, to back up every belief so new recruits gain a sense of history and place as well as of well-being.

But don't get the impression that these budding New Agers are a soft touch. There's a flinty core to this fluffy ball of spiritualism. While your spiritualist acquaintance is more than happy to hear about ecosystem research on the robustness of multicrop farming, mention equally well-established ideas about the advantages and safety of genetic modification and you will be met with disbelief. Describe the potential of genetically modified foods to secure the world's food supply and you'll be derided for being so easily fooled by corporations. The bottom line: If you buy into Mother Earth it's to the exclusion of other possibilities, there's no place for evidence, rationality, or skepticism. And that raises a big red flag.

For example, with alternative medicines the problems are two-fold. One is that they aren't proven to be effective by rigorous scientific assessment, so while they may not be dangerous directly they could allow development of disease preventable by mainstream

medicine. The other is that they are a drain on resources. A prime example is a recent press release I received describing "B17 metabolic therapy" for patients with ovarian cancer and calling for its introduction by the UK National Health Service. The regime includes "melatonin, shark cartilage, ozone therapy, and ultraviolet blood irradiation" as well as "injections of B17 every other day," and a "healthy vitamin-enriched organic diet."

The Mother Earth sensibility is also behind the ever-more-aggressive movement to do away with animal experiments, and even with animal experimenters. One former hero of mine has said, "I understand why ... so-called laboratory scientists are repaid with violence. It is the only language they understand." For shame, Morrissey!

My conclusion: The threat to science from what Silver calls the spiritual left may already have overtaken the threat from the religious right. Life scientists are quick to jump on maneuvers by the right to replace scientific ideas with religious ideas in teaching. Reaction is well coordinated (see the Notebook item on [p. 19](#) for an example) and the arguments (e.g., against intelligent design) are compelling.

Now it's time to apply our collective energy to counter the rise in mysticism and fall of skeptical inquiry. The first step: Find out how many in your circle of acquaintances, including your students, are already operating in this mindset. As a second step you could do worse than to proffer copies of Silver's book. Once the core weakness of the spiritual-left

mindset is exposed, a more rational viewpoint might ensue.

This affects us all: We need to be zealots in hunting out this contagious and pernicious viewpoint, labeling it as such, and addressing it wherever and whenever it is encountered.

rgallagher@the-scientist.com

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