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Religion and Attitudes toward the Environment

ANDREW GREELEY*

This essay is an attempt to expand a study reported in 1989 of the relationship between religion and concern for the environment in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Here, only one variable was used, willingness to spend money on the environment, but findings were based on a national data set. The finding of the Tulsa study is confirmed: Low levels of environmental concern correlate with a biblical literalism. They also correlate with being Christian and with confidence in the existence of God. On the other hand, support for environmental spending correlates positively with a gracious image of God and with being Catholic. However, explanatory models suggest that it is not biblical literalism as such which relates to lack of environmental concern, but rather a rigid political and religious "story."

INTRODUCTION

Lynn White (1967) in an oft-cited article has argued that the Judaeo-Christian heritage is responsible for the current ecological crisis because of the injunction of Genesis I that humans exercise "dominion" over the earth. So stated, White's thesis is at such a level of generality that it cannot be either falsified or verified. However, it is possible to draw hypotheses from White's model that can be tested. Eckberg and Blocker (1989), in a random sample of people in Tulsa, Oklahoma, found that four "environmental concern" factors correlated with four "religion" variables: being Jewish or Christian (as opposed to having no religious affiliation), being conservative Protestant, believing that religion is important, and believing in the literal interpretation of the Bible. When background variables were taken into account, and all the religious variables entered into the equation, the crucial predictor of lower levels of environmental concern was belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible.

Eckberg and Blocker did not offer a social science theory that would explain how biblical literalism leads to lower levels of environmental concern. It might well be that the cultural value of human dominion over the earth does influence environmental attitudes, but it would have to do so through mediating sociological and psychological mechanisms by which a religious value produces an opposition to environmental concerns. Eckberg and Blocker found a relationship in the predicted direction, but they did not account for that relationship.

In this paper a model is proposed that might account for the relationship and at the same time provide for the possibility of an alternative explanation that does not require an appeal to the Book of Genesis.

If one believes that religion, before it becomes anything else, is a set of narrative symbols that explain the nature of human reality (Geertz 1968), might not fundamen-

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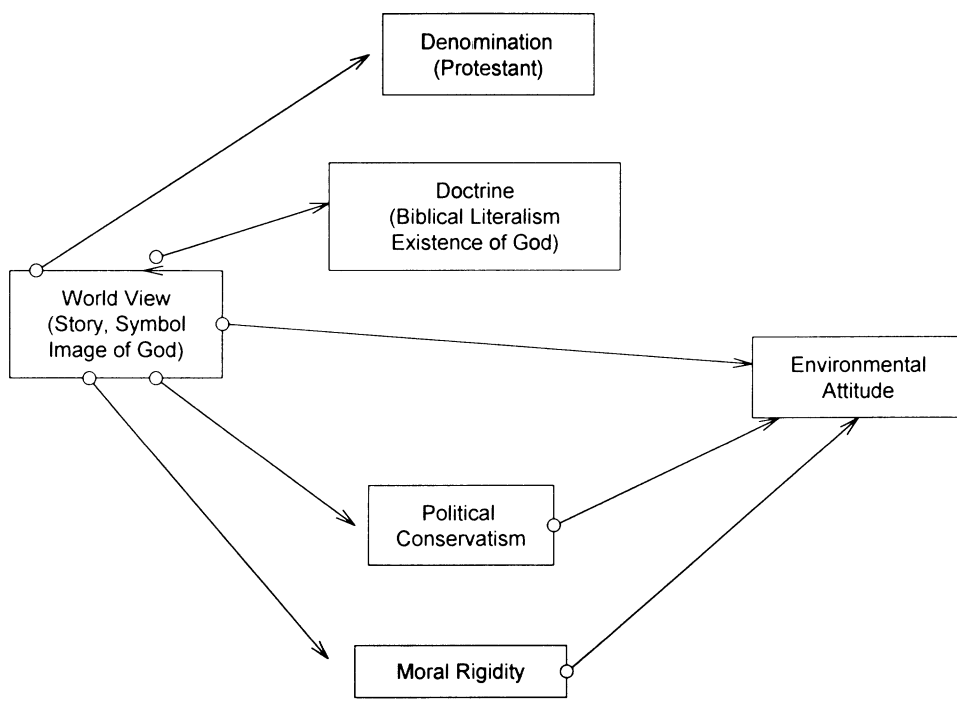
talists tend to have a harsher system of narrative symbols which could account in part for the correlation between a belief in a literal interpretation of the scriptures and a negative attitude toward the environment? Might not fundamentalists with more benign narrative images have a more constructive view of the environment?

Moreover, fundamentalists are known to be politically and morally conservative. Might not that fact account for their environmental attitudes without having to appeal to their doctrinal convictions? Might they not dismiss environmental concern as part of a liberal political agenda that they reject; or might they not be more rigid religiously and hence incapable of absorbing new moral concerns? In fact, might those fundamentalists who are politically liberal and morally flexible be as likely to support environmental measures as anyone else? Might they not, like Southern Baptist Albert Gore, then become "pro-environment"?

Figure 1 illustrates this model, which is based on a sociological theory of religion that has been elaborated in detail elsewhere (Greeley 1989, 1990), and of which Figure 1 is a simplified schematic outline. It is assumed in this theory that religion is a symbol system (Geertz 1968) that purports to explain ultimate reality. These symbols describe in story form what life means and provide paths through the complexities of life. In this theoretical perspective, religion takes its origins and raw power from the poetical,

FIGURE 1

**MODEL TO EXPLAIN RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN**



the metaphorical, the experiential dimension of human living. Religion is narrative imagery before it is anything else. This imagery, strongly influenced by one's relationship with parents and parents' relationships with one another, is the foundation on which all else is superstructure.

Thus the narrative images are both causally and chronologically prior to other religious manifestations and to political and social orientations. Even the way one shapes one's denominational affiliation is a function of religious stories that one absorbs in the family triad at a time of life when the denomination is only a word.

The other cultural systems (science, common sense, ideology, law, ethics) are to an extent shaped by the ultimate worldview: They tell stories that are reflections of the religious stories (Geertz 1957, 1964). Thus in Figure 1 the middle column represents values that mediate between the religious worldview or story and environmental concern. It is assumed that these four variables (denomination, doctrine, political attitudes, and moral attitudes) are all influenced by worldview and also relate to one another, although the paths linking them to one another are omitted in Figure 1. To some extent these variables may be considered articulations of and reflections on the narrative symbols that are the poetic and experiential foundations of religion.

As stated in Figure 1, the model suggests that once imagery and political and moral conservatism are taken into account, there will be no statistically significant paths from either Denomination (Protestant) or Doctrine (theism and biblical literalism) to Environmental Attitude.

The question then becomes whether, in multiple regression equations in which a belief in literal interpretation (or religious affiliation) is entered along with measures of political conservatism, moral rigidity, and religious imagery, there continues to be a statistically significant relationship between religious doctrine or affiliation and environmental attitudes. If there is no such relationship, then one would have to say that the model in Figure 1 cannot be rejected: The apparent effect of Genesis I on environmental attitudes is in fact spurious, just as differential religious attitudes toward AIDS can be accounted for by images and rigidities of style (Greeley 1991).

Eckberg and Blocker (1989) did not have a sufficient number of Catholics in their Tulsa sample of 300 (with a 55% response rate) to determine whether there was any difference between Catholics and Protestants in attitudes toward the Bible. As a sacramental religion with the conviction that such earthly realities as fire and water, light and darkness, bread and wine, oil and sexual love are metaphors for God, and with less concern for fundamentalist orthodoxy, Catholicism might reasonably be expected to have members with more concern about the environment. If that relationship should appear, according to the model in Figure 1, it would be explained by a direct line between worldview and environmental attitude, reinforced by an interaction with Catholic affiliation.

The 1988 General Social Survey (Davis and Smith 1988) had a single item on environmental concern which, when combined with the special religion module in the same survey, provides the necessary data for examining the religious dynamics that might intervene between biblical literalism and lack of concern for the environment. The advantage of using the 1988 GSS is that it included a national sample of respondents and extensive religious questions. The disadvantage is that there was only one

environmental variable.¹

FINDINGS

The correlation coefficients in Table 1 confirm the findings of Eckberg and Blocker (1989). Biblical literalism (I use here the same variable wording they used)² correlates negatively with environment concern, as do belief in God and Christian affiliation, as opposed to a combination of Jews and those with no religious affiliation. Those with a more gracious narrative image of God (Mother, Spouse, Lover, Friend, as opposed to Father, Master, Judge, and King) are more likely to support increased spending on the environment. There is no significant correlation between environment concern and either frequency of prayer or church attendance.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS WITH SUPPORT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Christian	-.102
Literal Bible Interpretation	-.108
Belief in God	-.085
Attend	-.040*
Gracious Image of God	.104
Catholic	.067

*not statistically significant.

As Figure 2 shows, Catholics are indeed more likely to support increased spending on the environment than are Protestants, but less likely than non-Christians. There is virtually no difference among the three branches of Protestantism (Smith 1986) in their response to environmental spending. Figures 3 and 4 show graphically that those who doubt the existence of God³ and consider the Bible a book of fables are more likely to

1. Respondents were asked: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name these problems and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little, or about the right amount: a) space exploration program; b) improving and protecting the environment; c) improving and protecting the nation's health; d) solving the problems of the big cities; e) halting the rising crime rate; f) dealing with drug addictions; g) improving the nation's educational program; h) improving the condition of blacks; i) the military, armaments and defense; j) foreign aid; k) welfare; l) highways and bridges; m) Social Security; n) mass transportation; o) parks and recreation?" In the late 1980s, the item that attracted the highest proportion in favor of spending more was the improvement and protection of the environment.

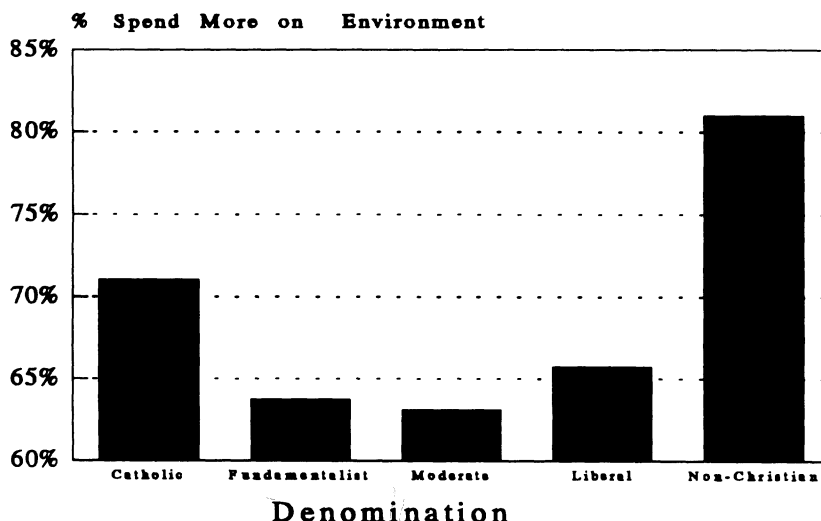
2. "What of these statements comes closest to describing your feeling about the Bible: a) The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; b) the Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; c) the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man."

3. The wording of this question was as follows: "Please look at this card and tell us which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God: a) I don't believe in God; b) I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out; c) I don't believe in a personal God but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind; d) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others; e) while I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God; f) I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it." The first four responses were combined in an "atheist/agnostic" category for this analysis.

be concerned about the environment than are those who are more orthodox in their beliefs. Figure 5 demonstrates that a benign image of God notably improves environmental support but only among Catholics, perhaps because of the sacramental nature of the Catholic belief system (Tracy 1982; Greeley 1989). Catholics with high scores on the "Grace Scale"⁴ are as likely as nonbelievers to favor more expenditure for the environment. Clearly much depends on what kind of religion one uses to predict environmental concern or lack thereof.

FIGURE 2

SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENT BY DENOMINATION



NON-CHRISTIANS SUPPORT ENVIRONMENT MORE THAN CHRISTIANS

ANALYSIS

There are four correlations in Table 1 that require explanation: Why are non-Christians, Catholics, and doctrinal liberals (on the existence of God and the inspiration of the Scriptures) all more likely to support environmental spending?

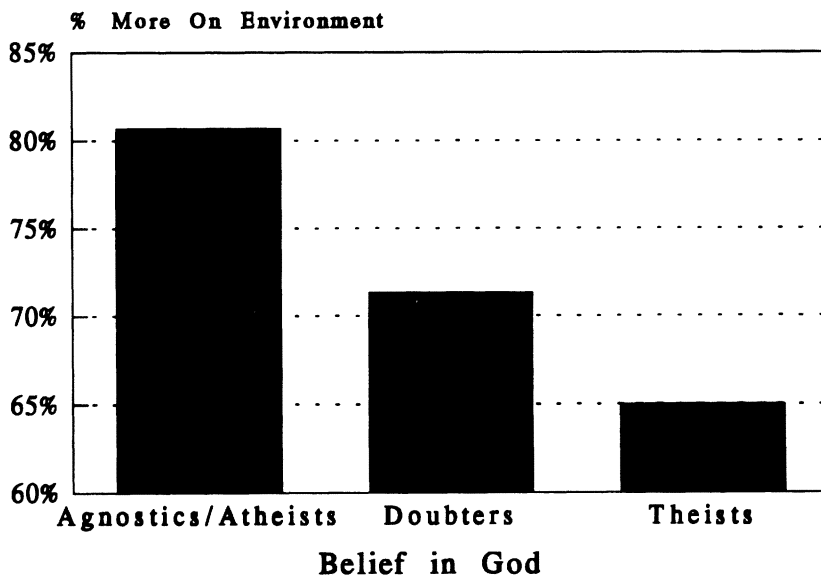
According to the theoretical perspective described in the introduction to this note, one might expect the differences to be explained by a combination of image of God and political and ethical liberalism.

Religious imagery (an indicator of the narrative symbol that encodes poetically religion as a culture system) was measured by four forced choices on a seven-point scale

4. It is called "Grace Scale" because it measures a "gracious" worldview. One point is granted for each of the four "gracious" images: Mother, Spouse, Lover, Friend.

FIGURE 3

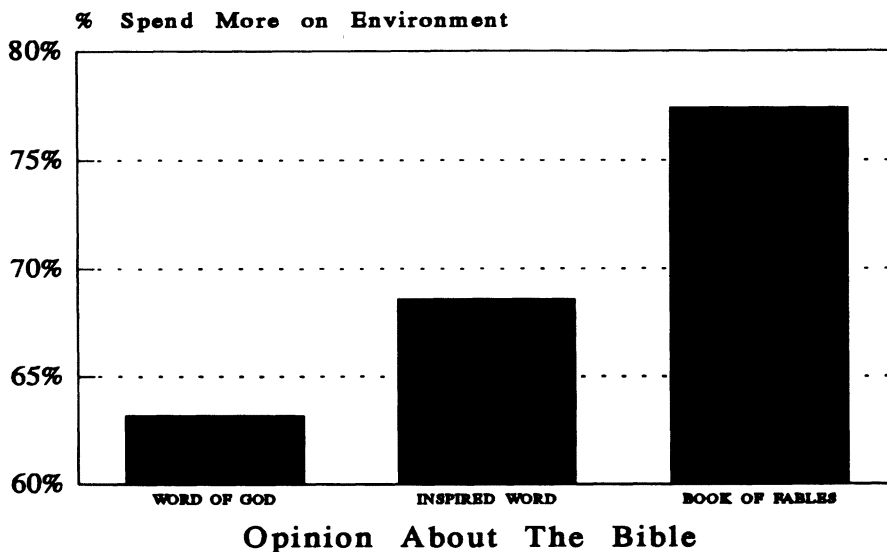
SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENT BY BELIEF IN GOD



NON-BELIEVERS SUPPORT ENVIRONMENT MORE THAN BELIEVERS

FIGURE 4

SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENT BY ATTITUDES TOWARD BIBLE



THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN BIBLE SUPPORT ENVIRONMENT LESS THAN OTHERS

FIGURE 5

SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENT BY DENOMINATION AND IMAGE OF GOD

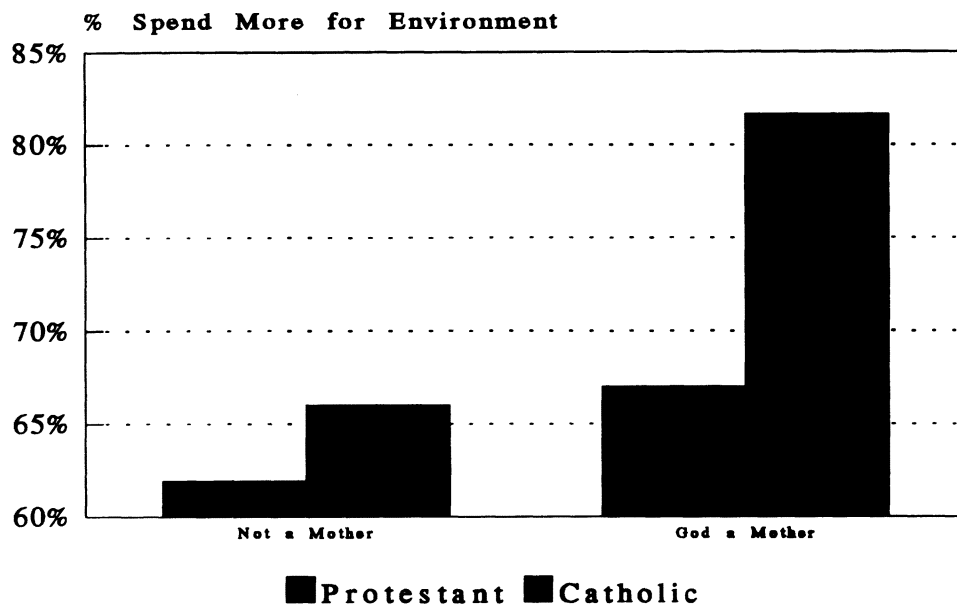


IMAGE OF GOD HAS MORE IMPACT ON CATHOLIC ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

between God as "Mother . . . Father," "Master . . . Spouse," "Judge . . . Lover," "Friend . . . King."

Political liberalism was measured by the GSS item in which the respondent located himself/herself on a seven-point scale between "liberal" and "conservative." If this scale diminishes the relationship between doctrine (or denomination) and environmental concern, it would follow that it is not biblical literalism as such, but rather politically conservative biblical literalism that relates to low environmental concern. Fundamentalists who are political liberals (and there are such, since political and religious attitudes do not correlate perfectly) would have as much environmental concern as would other political liberals.

Ethical liberalism was measured by a factor in GSS 1988 made up of four variables, two of which measured opinions on what is religiously important: "How important is each of the following to you: . . . to follow one's own conscience even if it means going against what the churches or the synagogues say and do; . . . [or] to believe in God without question or doubt." The other two items in the factor dealt more directly with moral issues: "Do you agree (strongly, somewhat) or disagree (strongly, somewhat) with the following statements: Those who violate God's rules must be punished . . . [and] Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard."

These four statements constitute a scale that might be said to represent a rigid

and moralistic approach to religion. If such a scale diminishes the negative relationship between religious variables and environmental concern, then it would follow that not religion as such but moralistic and rigid religion is connected with less concern about the environment.

TABLE 2

MODEL TO EXPLAIN RELIGIOUS CORRELATIONS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

	Christian	Catholic	Belief in God	Biblical Literalism
Correlation (r)	-.071 ¹	.068	-.085	-.108
Beta net of Religious Image	-.059	.001 ^{2*}	-.058	-.086
Beta net of Religious Image and Political Views	-.038		-.021*	-.063
Beta net of Religious Image and Political Views and Moral Rigidity	-.020*		.000*	-.038*

*not significant.

¹does not take into account age or education.

²includes interaction between "Catholic" and Image of God.

The first column in Table 2 applies this model to the differences between Christians and non-Christians, with the addition of age and educational controls since the non-Christians tend to be younger and better educated (because they are both younger and include Jews).⁵ When age and education are taken into account in a multiple regression equation, the *r* of $-.102$ between environmental concern and Christian is reduced to a standardized correlation (beta) of $-.071$. A gracious image of God reduces it further to $-.059$. Liberal political views lower the beta even more to $-.038$ and statistical insignificance. Moral rigidity lowers the correlation even further to $-.020$.

Those who are not Christian, in other words, are more likely to support environmental concerns because they are younger, better educated, and have a more liberal political agenda and a more benign story of God. The first three variables are not specifically religious.

The second column of Table 2 shows that the different stories of God that Catholics carry in their religious imaginations account entirely for the differences between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics are more likely to be concerned about the environment because they are more likely to have gracious images of God, and because their picture of God is more likely to affect their environmental concern than is the Protestants' picture of God.

5. The parameters in the bottom three rows of Table 2 are betas from three regression equations written for each of the four religions, with environmental attitude as the dependent variable. Thus in the second row the coefficients represent the relationship between environmental attitude and the four religious variables in a regression equation in which religious imagery has been entered. In the third row the coefficient is the beta between the religious variables and environmental attitude, with imagery and political views entered in the regression equation. In the fourth row the beta results from a regression equation in which, in addition to the religious variable, image, political views, and moral rigidity have been entered.

Different images of God and more liberal political views eliminate the significant $-.085$ relationship between environmental concern and certainty about the existence of God, reducing the relation to a beta of $-.021$ in the third column of Table 2. Those who were less certain about God were also more likely to have benign images of God and to be liberal in their political perspectives. Those who were certain of the existence of God, but viewed deity more "graciously," and who were more liberal in their political orientation, were as likely to be concerned about the environment as were those who were less certain about the existence of God. It is not the certainty that accounts for the lower level of concern, but the political and religious "story" that tends to accompany certainty but does not follow inevitably from it.

The same explanatory model applies in the fourth column in Table 2 to the relationship between belief in the literal interpretation of scriptures and environmental concern, with the addition of the rigid "approach" to religion required to diminish the correlation to statistical insignificance, from $-.108$ to $-.038$. Thus the relationship described by Eckberg and Blocker (1989) can be accounted for by the fact that biblical literalists are more likely to have a stern image of God, to be conservative in their political views, and to be rigid in their "approach" to religion and morality. Those biblical literalists who are politically, religiously, and ethically "liberal" are as likely to be concerned with the environment as are their nonfundamentalist counterparts.

Moral, religious, political, imaginative, biblical, and environmental liberalism do not correlate completely, or each variable would not add to the explanatory power of the models in Table 2. However, they do overlap to such an extent that biblical literalism can be understood as part of and a sign of (i.e., a story of) a more rigid and more conservative religious "style." If harsh religious images and political and ethical conservatism are removed from the "style," in real people or in a multiple regression equation, the lower level of environmental concern disappears.

The Bible, it might be argued not unreasonably, is not the cause of lower support for environmental spending; it is rather the pretext of those whose rigid "style" inclines them both to resist environmental concern and insist on religious certainty.

Does religion cause this rigidity, or are certain personalities inclined to gravitate toward rigid religion? This question is unanswerable unless one defines religion more precisely. Some kinds of religious orientation, like the interaction between Catholicism and benign religious imagery, seem purely religious and unaffected by political, social, or ethical perspectives. How does religion correlate with environmentalism? It depends on the imaginative contents and on the political and ethical correlations of a person's religious story.

CONCLUSION

In the United States the correlations between religion and environmental attitudes seem to be spurious. A rigid religious orientation does correlate with negative attitudes toward spending on the environment. However, when religious imagery and political and moral rigidity (i.e., the need for certainties in a world where certainties are fewer than religion can provide) are taken into account, the correlation disappears. Those who believe in God and the Bible, and Christians who reject the various levels of rigidity,

are as likely as anyone else to support environmental spending. Catholics in particular are more likely to support it because of the impact that a benign image of God has on their worldview.

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