

Coming to grips with science and spirituality in America

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In 1967, in the context of a newly emerging industrial-environmental crisis in the United States and Europe, Lynn White wrote a historic essay on the relationship between belief and societal actions on the environment. White wrote that, "What people do about their ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and our destiny- that is by religion. ...Since the roots of our [environmental] trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not..." Since then, White's essay has been cited by scientists as justification for the exclusion of spiritually motivated ideas from environmental research and policy efforts in the USA. The last decade has witnessed an explosion of controversy over the role of religion in science education, creationism and naturalism, and the interference of spiritually-related politics in the research agendas and budgets of public agencies. These controversies make it clear that the schism between science and spirituality in America has widened in the latter half of the 20th century. This paper argues that over the span of this generation, the secularization of the American scientific culture has crystallized and hardened to current state, such that many contemporary scientists and practitioners are both unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the religious factors and implications of their work. The result of this hardening is a self-imposed alienation of the scientific community from mainstream spiritual currents and cultures in the USA, which in turn contributes to further mistrust and discomfort with science by the general public. Religious organizations and spiritual motivations are among the most powerful and influential in the USA, with substantial power over the individual and the community. Far from being an incurable cause of environmental destruction (as has so often been alleged), American spirituality holds enormous cultural potential that can help technical professionals communicate their ideas more effectively and achieve more harmonious and workable policy solutions. Moreover, it has been demonstrated time and again that communities are more receptive to new ideas when those ideas are framed in a familiar spiritual or cultural context. It makes sense, then, that our cultural taboo against spiritual discussion is a significant liability for the scientific community. Examples are presented to demonstrate how scientists can effectively communicate their technical insights and policy recommendations using language and ideas that interface with, rather than offend, the spiritual sensibilities of the community that is impacted by the work. Scientists and technical professionals in the USA must learn to come to grips with the interplay between science and spirituality in their professional work, transforming the scientific culture from one allergic to spiritual language and ideas, into one that promotes spiritual literacy and intelligence.