



# **DESPERATE TIMES, SUSTAINABLE CREED: THE POST-PANDEMIC SPIRITUAL PARADIGM IN MADDADDAM TRILOGY BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

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The cornerstone of environmental thought is the impulse to defend the existential interests of living forms, under conditions of unprecedented threat engendered mainly by the applications of science and rationality. This hostility towards science and rationality often leads to a search for a new cosmological, spiritual or religious basis for human life and inter-species relationships. Within the green movement there is considerable interest in the promise proffered by eastern religious traditions for the refurbishment of the human-in-the world relationship. Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and Islam are recognized as religious systems with the capacity to underwrite a new environmental enlightenment. The impact of eastern religious and neo-pagan traditions within the green movement highlights the perceived failure of mainstream Christianity to provide a relevant basis for an ecologically benign society.

In his seminal essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” published in *Science* magazine in 1967, historian Lynn Townsend White, Jr. argues that those Biblical precepts made Christianity, “especially in its Western form,” the “most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.” In stark contrast to pagan animism, Christianity posited “a dualism of man and nature” and “insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.” The hierarchical, anthropocentric and patriarchal understandings of creation lead to the alienation of human beings from each other and from nature. Men and women were created in the image of God, given a privileged place among creatures, and commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth (Gen. 1:26—28; Ps. 8:5). Fundamental to a properly Christian environmental ethic, then, are the Creator/creature distinction and the doctrine of humankind’s creation in the image of God.

Both by endowing them with his image and by placing them in authority over the earth, God gave men and women superiority and priority over all other earthly creatures. This implies that proper environmental stewardship, while it seeks to harmonize the fulfillment of the needs of all creatures, nonetheless puts human needs above non-human needs when the two are in conflict. Man's dominion over earth suggested in *Genesis* can thus be interpreted to mean that God planned all creation exclusively for man's benefit and rule. Some environmentalists reject this vision as "anthropocentric" or "speciesist," and instead promote a "biocentric" alternative. White believed that science and technology could not solve the ecological problems they had created; our anthropocentric Christian heritage is too deeply ingrained. "Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim"(1204 ).Thus western Christianity's cosmology taught Europeans to view themselves as separate from nature, which they could dominate with indifference in pursuit of their salvific destiny. The environmental task was therefore clear: recover an ecological worldview centered on nature's value rather than human transcendence.

So he suggests as a model Saint Francis, "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history." Francis should have been burned as a heretic, White writes, for trying "to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation." White argued that something similar to that vision is necessary to save the world in our time. Alternative environmental cults can aid us in ushering an ecologically sustainable and tranquil future.

The present study attempts to offer a re-negotiation of nature-human bond in the context of the alternative environmental religious sect the God's Gardeners conceptualized by Margaret Atwood in the second installment of her *MaddAddam Trilogy*, *The Year of the Flood*. Although *The Year of the Flood* returns to the dystopian world of *Oryx and Crake*, reliving the same nightmare (albeit from a different perspective), this time the emphasis is on the hope of human survival and redemption rather than the prevailing despair of Jimmy/Snowman's "Last Man" narrative. *The Year of the Flood*, acquaints the reader with Toby's story of loss and survival set against the violent Pleebland slums from where an eco-religious group called the God's Gardeners rescues her. The group captain is the grandiloquent Adam One and his brother Zeb and an assortment of other 'Adams' and 'Eves' live together on a lush green rooftop elevated above the slums. Gradually Toby merges with the group and she is relegated to play a key role in the Gardener's secret network, which performs acts of terrorism to undermine the hegemony of corporate

power. As a disguised agent of the gardeners, she reaches the the AnooYoo Spa where she ends up fenced in, as the pandemic erupts. Flood closes on Toby breaking her isolation to save a couple of younger women, Amanda and Ren, from the hands of a band of evil men, the Painballers.

In “Compassion, Imagination, and Reverence for All Living Things: Margaret Atwood’s Spiritual Vision in *The Year of the Flood*,” Carol Osborne states: “Atwood is using her novel, and the promotional events connected with it, to ‘preach’ the key principles of the fictional God’s Gardeners: environmental stewardship, sustainable living practices, and reverence for the interconnectedness of all living things” (Osborne32). The Gardeners’ theology is a combination of Christian imagery and scientific knowledge and their religion fuses reverence for life with biotechnological knowledge. Quite remarkable is their shift from the fundamental assumption of patriarchal discourse that Man should “be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, the wild animals and all the other creatures that creep along the ground” (*English Parallel Bible*, Gen1:26). On the other hand the Gardeners proclaim their biological connection to the world around and the other non-human life:

God could have made Man out of pure Word, but He did not use this method. . . He made us “a little lower than the Angels,” but in other ways – and Science bears this out – we are closely related to our fellow Primates, a fact that the haughty ones of this world do not find pleasant to their self-esteem. Our appetites, our desires, our more uncontrollable emotions – all are Primate!(TYF 52)

The novel is underscored with similar sermons that manifest certain aspects of Gardener theology and reiterate the necessity of peaceful human/non-human co-existence. The crux of their theology is the conception of nature-human reciprocity, that all living things, and not just humans, are indispensable to the created world. Atwood explains that the universe is made from something, and various terms can be attributed to this something, but many people label it as “God.” In this case, every form of matter is therefore a “different expression of ‘God,’” so when species become extinct, God is essentially being diminished. If the entire world contains God in it, then, any alterations or destruction to the Earth erases iterations of God. The Gardeners have the clear conviction that that their “sacred task of stewardship” lies in preserving the inherent value of each created being, down to the smallest bug. Adam One the most senior member of the Gardener community, preaches that the Gardeners and all humans should not “consider... themselves as exceptional... that they are set above all other Life,” and asks, “Why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality we belong to Everything?” (TYF 63). The

Gardeners dismiss the dissociation of God from nature that traditional Christian faith maintains through the inference that humans are the only beings that can encounter God.

Atwood intersperses fourteen hymns throughout the novel, emphasizing their importance to the Gardeners' religious message. In the hymn, "Oh Let Me Not Be Proud,"<sup>6</sup> the Gardeners sing about nature-human interconnectedness. The first stanza is an earnest plea: "Oh let me not be proud, dear Lord,/Nor rank myself above/The other Primates, through whose genes/We grew into your Love" (TYF 54). The third stanza furthers the commentary on human evolution through monkeys and gorillas: "We cannot always trace Your path/Through Monkey and Gorilla,/Yet all are sheltered underneath/Your Heavenly Umbrella" (TYF 54). Their point is that just because humans have a higher capability of understanding God than their primate ancestors, it doesn't mean that primates deserve less than humans or mean less to God.

The Gardeners who value every creation of God deems it their responsibility to restore Life when it is threatened and to resist the subordination of nature. Adam One, expounds the Gardener theology with the authority of a biblical patriarch. According to him the Fall of Man was multidimensional. The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology; from simple signals into complex grammar, and thus into humanity; from firelessness into fire, and thence into weaponry; and from seasonal mating into an incessant sexual twitching. Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment into the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and the distant future (TYF224)

The Gardeners are set against a complicated, pre-apocalyptic world that casts a shadow over environmental concerns and challenges life. According to them, the society outside is the "Exfernal World," a rotten and filthy landscape steeped in pervasive consumerism and environmental desecration. They inhabit a world controlled by bio-technological corporations and where people are categorized into two- the elite, gated Compounds where scientists and businessmen live and work and "Pleeblands," the cities of the lower classes. Gardeners operate within this less privileged space. They become a self-reliant group, living in tune with the rhythms of nature, shielded by the Edencliff Rooftop Garden. The garden is virtually a haven for them and Adam One, the group's leader, preaches his sermons in the Garden, surrounded by the innumerable flora and fauna. Their life is centred round the Garden which is a microcosm marking their regard for the entire planet. Its Creation Day marks the beginning of time for the Gardeners. The Garden epitomizes

their “small part in the redemption of God’s creation from decay” (TYF 11). As they anticipate an apocalypse, the Waterless Flood, they consider themselves as “a plural Noah” having been “forewarned” of a coming disaster and “called” to “restore Life” after the destruction strikes (TYF 24).

They are “strict vegetarians” that reject eating all meat, and particularly protest the Exfernal World’s meat creations like Secret Burgers, containing mysterious ground-up animal protein, and the genetically-modified ChickieNobs. Because of their garden, the Gardeners never lack in food. They learn how to forage, grow, and know which plants and edible weeds to eat, judging what is safe by whether or not “a mouse has eaten it” (TYF 125). These skills prepare the Gardeners for survival in an apocalyptic world. The Gardeners’ green eschatology includes a noticeable dose of pragmatic advice, ranging from such banalities as the use of sunhats, “butter substitute,” or recyclable materials for festivals to concrete survivalist technique

Of the various courses the Gardener children had, “Predator-Prey Relationship” classes are really remarkable. Despite their “Vegivows”, the children were trained to hunt down animals, in situations of emergency when their bodies need animal protein. They have to begin with the lower level of the food chain. Eggs of various birds should be their first choice, the unavailability of which sanctions them to hunt down small animals and consume them, and most preferably, those animals should preferably not among the “endangered species”. They are supposed to chant the standard Gardener apology when they hunt and consume these animals.

The Garden as a space of perfect harmony and symbiosis offers itself as a contrast to the Paradise Inc in *Oryx and Crake*. Atwood offers a unique synthesis of environmental activism, aspects of fundamental Christianity and other similar religions, and scientific thought in her creation of the Gardener religion. The Gardeners further integrate features of common, well -ordered religions alongside their own sermons and hymns, with distinct rituals, marriage and burial ceremonies, Festivals, Feast Days, a specific diet, and dress code. Their holidays, or Saints’ Days, commemorate different environmentalists, martyrs, and theologians, from Rachel Carson, Mahatma Gandhi to Julian of Norwich. Since the environmental is inseparably associated with the spiritual, Lauren Maxwell, who comments on environmental activism within the Gardeners’ religion, depicts the Gardeners as “a movement that grounds environmental stewardship in spiritual devotion” (Maxwell4).

It may seem strange that most of the myths in the ecologically aligned trilogy are biblical, since the Bible is often blamed as one of the texts justifying human

dominion and the current destruction of biodiversity on the planet. The Biblical myths are ecologically rewritten. Adam One, though comically, often reinterprets biblical myths in ecological terms with the humour being lost on them and they take it quite seriously. Biblical myths are ecologised; ecological scientists are sanctified. Despite the pessimism of some of the God's Gardeners' beliefs, their inconsistency and comical aspects prevent them from becoming Word or dogma,

Adam One's revising of the myth of the fall is an anti-type to the biblical myth of the fall, and although it may seem comical, it also contains profound truths. It at once reaffirms and radically reinterprets the biblical myth of the fall in terms of modern science. The God's Gardeners interpret the virus that destroys most of humanity as the Waterless Flood, thus treating it as an anti-type to the original Flood myth.

Located in an abandoned urban space as opposed to a prosperous countryside, the Gardeners interweave an Evangelical environmentalism with a New Age eco-consciousness and contemporary ecological evolution. The creed of God's Gardeners seems to be Atwood's alternative way of survival. Atwood's new age, thus, affirms a deeply ecological vision, a radical anti-type to the Bible's anti-ecological vision of the New Age.

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