

Remarks on acceptance of the inaugural
ISSRNC Lifetime Achievement Award*
J. Baird Callicott
January 16, 2016, "Religion Science and the Future"
University of Florida, Gainesville

"I am both totally surprised and deeply honored. I thank Bron Taylor, founder of the International Society for the Study of Religion Nature and Culture, and the Awards Committee, and Sarah Pike, president of ISSRNC and its board of governors for selecting me to be the first recipient of the Society's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Consistent with my communitarian philosophy, I also thank the community of scholars and all its members with whom my work is in conversation. You can only do philosophy by swimming in a pool of ideas. My personal thinking is not my personal thinking at all—I consider myself to be giving expression to inchoate ideas that are nascent in the ever-evolving communal zeitgeist. I just try to channel them, so to speak, and express them in a clear, precise, and vivid way. So my thanks go out to all of you here—and to so many others who are not here—without whom I would have nothing to think or say.

Now there's another side to this Lifetime Achievement Award—which you might be tempted to think of as the dark side. You can't be a recipient of a lifetime achievement award until you have spent a lifetime working away at something and that means that your lifetime is pretty much all spent.

But a communitarian philosophy also rescues you from morbid thoughts about the end of your lifetime—about death. An individual's lifetime is limited—and by the way, it should stay that way, pace the transhumanists. The lifetime of the human gene pool—to which I have contributed in a very small way—and of the human meme pool—to which my contribution has been a bit larger—is not immortal. No. All things good as well as bad come to an end. But they are indefinitely sustainable. And that's what we as contributors to that meme pool should, in my opinion, make the *raison d'être* of our work. We are the fiduciaries of the human enterprise. But because the human enterprise is thoroughly embedded in what Aldo Leopold called the "biotic enterprise"—the living, enduring biosphere—we are also its fiduciaries.

Lest we be insufferably hubristic, I should point out that the biosphere is at no existential risk from us precocious primates. I cringe when I hear some of my colleagues say the planet is dying or the Earth is sick or global warming is a biospheric fever. We can certainly alter the current state of the biosphere—at our own peril—but it will endure with or without us. And it will rebound from the sixth mass extinction with even more exuberant biodiversity, just as it has from the past five. But it will do so

on a temporal scale that is not humanly meaningful. So, scaling down to humanly relevant time, we are fiduciaries of our “fellow voyagers in the odyssey of evolution” and that means it’s our job to do all we can to preserve the Holocene climate and to keep them in that boat with us, so as to get us all through the pandemographic bottleneck that we all find ourselves in today.

As many of you know, I am one of the religionizers of science. The cardinal virtue of scientific epistemology is doubt. Doubt is the worst epistemological enemy of faith-based religions. Doubt drives the scientific worldview—ever self-correcting, ever expanding, and ever changing. I think that Aldo Leopold’s greatest achievement was to give voice to the aesthetic and spiritual potential in the scientific worldview.

The religionization of science is neither scientism nor the deification of science itself. Rather, science is a lens through which we see the world. And looking through that lens reveals a world that is deeply beautiful, deeply wonderful (in the literal sense of the word), and deeply mysterious. Science does its best to demystify the world, to be sure, but with every new re-vision of the world, new and deeper mysteries emerge. And at the bottom of it all is what the French philosopher Marcel Conche calls the infinite. Not Zeno’s infinite, but Anaximander’s *apeiron*, and Plato’s *chora*—that which ever eludes and resists the forms, resists cognitive capture, the incomprehensible and even un-namable. So one of the most attractive features of the scientific worldview is its infinitality. There will always be the unknown, the blank space on the cognitive map that will lure inquiry.

That’s my two-cents worth for the theme of this conference—Religion, Science, and the Future.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.”

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