

The 'Church of Nature' and the sudden collapse of the cult of Extinction Rebellion

When a cult loses its grip on a person, a form of reawakening takes place. It involves having to return to a society not managed by guru slogans, children chanting or all information managed via a dogmatic funnel into a simplified worldview. Many young people in the West are reawakening from an experience with the Extinction Rebellion cult which had gripped them for an intense period for most of 2019.

There are many emotions to manage in a post-cult reawakening: bitterness at the deception, embarrassment over the personal vulnerability, apologetic to those close who may have been hurt, concern for those still held in the grips of the gurus, fragility about re-entering society. Should the experience be blocked out, explained away or assessed? A catharsis may be necessary to come to terms with the power the cult had held in dominating the individual's freedom.



For around a year Extinction Rebellion managed to grip many young, vulnerable idealists in many ways that religious cults operate. What were some of the manipulative tools they used? In the heady days of 2019, Extinction Rebellion:

- postulated an end-of-days apocalypse within ten years
- provided a simplified salvation pathway and virtue reinforcement
- identified a dogmatic "us vs them" war on evil

- created a fun, carnival atmosphere with communal chants at their events
- developed a series of pagan-like spiritual rituals and iconic priestesses

But this cult was a shallow, abusive front. The [objective](#) of the organisers (the Rogers and the Ruperts on the activist extreme) was to overthrow the capitalist state, and an army of brainwashed young people simultaneously dancing, chanting and weeping in the streets proved, on paper, to be the perfect distraction. Add a few ageing celebrities, some clever street pranks and a cocktail of virtue signalling opportunities ... the strategy was brilliant (even if their organisation and execution was pure [Pythonesque](#)).

The Broad Church of Nature

Cults grow on the far, narrow edges of religious belief systems.

Within every religion there are extremes – the zealots, the dogmatists, the fundamentalists, the manipulative cult gurus... I have written often how environmentalism is our new religion with a wide range of believers practising a variety of rituals (like recycling, culinary sacrifices, carbon emission cuts...), preaching of Armageddon (climate change), offering redemption from original sin (consumption) with a collection of angels, saints and demons every church needs to “iconicise”. This Church of Nature grew out of the ashes of the decline of traditional religious faith in a more affluent West. We did not grow too sophisticated for religion; it just donned different cloaks and occupied different temples.

Religion provides meaning in life, virtues, inspiration; it also protects the believers in a communal context from their deepest fears and concerns. Most in the congregation of the Church of Nature want to live decent lives and feel good about themselves. They listen to the sermons against consumption but do enjoy some of life’s finer pleasures. They donate when the collection basket comes around, but are not active in the campaigns.

On the extreme of the Church of Nature lie the cult organisations that dictate to the true believers, crusaders and missionaries: the zealots who provide the religious oxygen for the clergy to breathe and the fires to burn. But the problem with fire and brimstone is that when outrage and condemnation burn out of control, they can bring temples down. Extinction Rebellion’s death-cult tactics discredited climate science, pushed environmentalism to the hard (anti-capitalist) left and offered little common ground for political compromise. When these groups used children to shame adults (*How dare you!*), political discourse was abandoned in favour of media spectacle.

In 2019 the Extinction Rebellion cult became the story and the Church of Nature lost its moderate members. This has seriously hurt the entire activist movement as cynicism and disenchantment does not translate into donations or further engagement within the wider Church.

The Fall from Grace

Extinction Rebellion had reached its cult zenith well before the COVID-19 pandemic took their issue off the front pages, silencing their media marketing machinery. Perhaps the turning point was [Canning Town Tube Station](#) where morning commuters turned into an angry mob beating up two XR hippies who had

tried to stop their train. That same day the two-week October blockade of London was quietly called off well-short of their campaign objectives.



Rupert Read used to attract millions, not 42 minions

Once the coronavirus lockdowns began to bite and people got to appreciate the consequences of Extinction Rebellion's demands (no jobs, no travel, no shops...) and the absence of any social interaction that the rebels could disrupt, the organisation went into hibernation. I attended an XR Zoom conference in May, 2020 where their main gurus unveiled their strategy for the next wave of post-COVID-19 campaigns. By the time their philosopher-in-chief, Rupert Read, took to the microphone, there were only 42 listeners on the view-counter (41 if you exclude the Risk-Monger). Today Extinction Rebellion's various twitter pages have little interaction or post engagement.

A cult with no following is merely a club. The revolution has faded to what was just a flash in the pan – an

embarrassing footnote in the history of the climate campaign. Extinction Rebellion has, well, gone extinct.

But that leaves the challenge of managing the reawakening. The rapid downfall of a powerful cult has left a generation of young people even more cynical and technophobic. Disenchanted, uninspired, the victims of the climate death cult campaigns who have been told everything that is wrong with humanity now have nothing positive to dream for. Who will provide these vulnerable young people with the solutions they crave? How can these post-cult victims reintegrate into a world with bigger (viral) fears on their plate?

Who is there to inspire young people crying out for something, someone, to believe in? Telling them how terrible everything is just creates cynicism and distrust (and an open door for the next opportunistic guru). This cult may be dead, but the problems and threats persist.



Weeping teens outside of Heathrow

What did the rapid rise and fall of Extinction Rebellion teach other activist campaign organisations?

When Extinction Rebellion co-founder, Roger Hallam, claimed that the environmental NGOs have failed to make progress over the last 30 years, he was not wrong. I had written about the [shift](#) in the activist model almost four years ago. The activism world is changing from an NGO-driven organisational structure to a loose body of gurus and networks driven bottom up by their members. So what have the dinosaurs learnt from this extinction threat?

- Today's movements have a very short period to focus attention, instil change and leave a legacy. In our hashtag culture, the 15 minutes of fame has become 15 seconds on TikTok. So actions have to be fast, on message and mediatic (*"Let's park a pink boat in Oxford Circus!"*).
- The revolution has to be driven by a simple, vague message devoid of detail (a citizen's assembly can sort all of that out once we get rid of the *bad people*). Most NGOs have become too "policy-wonkish" when the cult-vulnerable just want a slogan to chant and a dream to hang onto.
- There is no grey on environmental issues; it is "us" versus "them". *They lie; we tell the truth. They want profits; we want to save the world. They pollute; we care.*

When frightened, the vulnerable are easily channelled into this binary world of good vs evil seeking trust and reassurance. There is no compromise or moderate alternative to be tolerated.

- People need to have easy (non-sacrificial) pledges and commitments worn as badges of honour. Only an idiot (or one of *them* who doesn't care) would not join us.
- Campaign actions should not be overtly activist-led or appear organised but more of an open, spontaneous, feel-good event to change the world with virtue-signalable gestures everyone can get in on. XR created an induction process for small independent cells of rebels (with little centralised accountability).
- Armies of children need to be marched in front of the cameras. Their purity and innocence are unquestionable (and they believe and do what you tell them). Try to also empower the older children. It's not hard to recruit teenagers craving attention by giving them an opportunity to rage at their parents' generation. And if anyone criticises this tactic, focus on the first white, middle-aged male to speak out, and, well, the rest of that script just writes itself.
- Targets of outrage need to be multiple, external and non-specific (international trade, capitalism, finance...). Contradictions can easily be absorbed into a general nondescript outrage (so I can protest against cars by chaining myself to a public transport vehicle and people will feel for my anxiety).

What did the Risk-Monger learn from the Extinction Rebellion flash in the pan?

- That people made sufficiently afraid can believe the most stupid things and act on them when placed in a crafty Armageddon-complex communications campaign. The Goebbelian nightmare that if you just incessantly repeat the same claim, load it with slogans (the "last generation") and fear (the "end of humanity") proved to be very easy to pull off.
- That a newspaper like the Guardian can fabricate a global NGO movement and provide the oxygen to manufacture front page news (for almost a year). Not only could they reinvigorate their columnists' careers (and speaking fees), the Guardian was aiming for a new generation of dedicated contributors. As with the cult of chemophobes driven by LeMonde in France, the mainstream media is morphing into activist campaign groups and as their readership is breaking down into social media tribes, there is no longer a means to question the objectivity of their "news". What I find astonishing is how no one is really noticing.
- That global leaders (at the UN, Davos...) and activist groups have no ethical qualms (at all) about using the emotional voices of children to advance their short-term interests. The degree of this exploitation in broad daylight was bone-chilling. If there were ever to be a course on [activist ethics](#), there should be a chapter on how Greta was exploited by the Parkland strategy recruiters.
- That leaders in European governments and corporations are quick to be mollified and bullied into agreeing to ridiculous campaign demands and ignoring basic facts rather than having the courage to stand up and defend the valuable societal goods they have just committed to surrender. With cameras shining on them, our leaders chose not to confront the cultists with facts but commend them for their commitment.
- That standing up to these cults is dangerous for one's reputation. I cannot count how many times I was painted (particularly by a small group of science communications SJWs) as being a white, middle-aged male climate denier with a Greta complex because I was drawing attention to the

manipulative and ridiculous death cult organisers. When people stop listening and become enraged, they get stupid very quickly (even those with diplomas in the sciences).

Reawakening of Hope ...

As the XR climate death cult hold on the young and the vulnerable quickly collapses into insignificance, I leave room for hope. Could other irrational environmentalist cults face the same evaporation of power? As we enter into the economic and financial reality of the post-COVID-19 nightmare, will more activist followers wake up to their naive commitments to manipulative gurus? Will donations dry up as the world moves from the problems created by elitist privilege and concentrates on paying the rent? For example:

Could the anti-ag-tech organic cult wither in the face of famine? As the second wave of locusts decimate crops in the Horn of Africa and Southern Asia and as bad weather lowered yields in western bread baskets, famines and food security issues could be the next big headline (if our logistics and global trade structure cannot withstand the present political pressure). The naturopath organic food cults rose on the success of ag-tech food abundance. The consequences of removing these technologies may just be the seeds of this cult's demise.

Could the chemophobic cult vanish with the demand for hygiene and public safety? Funny, I have not seen any public demand for non-toxic hand sanitisers recently. I have not seen people campaigning against single-use plastic PPE. Organic cotton gloves are not in demand. Perhaps the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has shown the shallow vacuity of the chemophobic cult campaigning to remove chemical products the wider public is loudly demanding. What we did see is the loss of our capacity to quickly scale up production of PPE and hygiene products. I wonder how these anti-chemical cults feel about this public demand for more ... chemicals.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other 'disruptive' innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

Could the anti-vaxx naturopaths become marginalised in a Post-COVID-19 dystopia? Anti-vaxx, anti-mask, anti-5G, anti-GMO – these paranoid cults have aligned to bizarrely battle the true source of evil: Bill Gates. The louder these naturopaths get, the more ridiculous they become and the less influence they will have on vulnerable populations. When people start realising the risks these groups are trying to impose on others, the consequences to society and the possibility of lost social goods, this cult will burn up faster than a 5G tower. It is hard to fall under the power of forces that are ridiculed and credited with catastrophe and lost societal benefits. Give Vandana and RFK Jr more microphones – the satirical value is to die for.

While many of these cult opportunists are too smart to fall into the trap of populist extremism that befell Extinction Rebellion, the best lesson from this cult downfall is that hubris and ambition has its own built-in circuit breakers. Cults cannot survive the mainstream scrutiny while maintaining zealot dogma. Radicalism amplified turns quickly into ridicule and leaves any mass movement open to internal collapse.

... and the Threat of Despair

But this hope carries with it a caution. Young people have been broken by the cynicism and campaign bipolarity of these cults. While the force of the fundamentalist dogma has weakened, there is nothing that now inspires them. I often speak with students on their outlook for the future and it is often very bleak. Rather than inspiration and mentors, they have slogans and “menteurs”. As they reawaken from their cult experience, there has to be more than just substance abuse and mental health issues awaiting them. In my professional world, the coronavirus lockdowns highlighted this vulnerability.

Young people need leaders who inspire. Ask anyone why they got into their profession and it was likely some mentor or inspirational character that lit them up at an iconic moment. But we seem to be stuck in a leaderless world of sub-tribes where any inspirational figure gets torn down faster than they can rise up. Social media identifies *troll-models*, promotes cynicism and deflates positivity creating an infectious breeding ground for such environmentalist cults.

Cults (via their gurus) offer young people hope, promise and inspiration. If we cannot address this hole in their lives, providing positive ideals for humanity via technology and science, restore trust and provide role models, we should prepare for more environmental-health death cults feeding off the despair of young people, making more outrageous claims, obstructing technological developments and spreading even more cynicism and fear.

David Zaruk has been an EU risk and science communications specialist since 2000, active in EU policy events from REACH and SCALE to the Pesticides Directive, from Science in Society questions to the use of the Precautionary Principle. He was part of the team that set up GreenFacts to encourage a wider use of evidence-based decision-making in the EU on environmental health matters. David is a professor at Odisee University College where he lectures on Communications, Marketing, EU Lobbying and PR. Find David on Twitter [@zaruk](#)

A version of this article was originally published at [Risk Monger](#) and has been republished here with permission.