

Volume 55 | Issue 1

---

2004

# Environmental Religion: A Theological Critique

Robert H. Nelson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Robert H. Nelson, *Environmental Religion: A Theological Critique*, 55 Case W. Res. L. Rev. 51 (2004)

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev/vol55/iss1/5>

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Case Western Reserve Law Review by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

# ENVIRONMENTAL RELIGION: A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE†

Robert H. Nelson‡

Environmentalism is a type of modern religion. This observation is not as controversial as it might seem. Indeed, many leading environmentalists have characterized their own efforts in religious terms.<sup>1</sup> Joseph Sax once wrote that he and fellow preservationists were “secular prophets, preaching a message of secular salvation.”<sup>2</sup> Theodore Roszak stated in *The Voice of the Earth* that environmental objectives have a “frankly religious character,”<sup>3</sup> and that the ultimate environmental goal should be “to heal the soul of its wounds and guide it to salvation.”<sup>4</sup> John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, wrote of a desire to go to the “high temples of the great Sierra Crown beyond our holy Yosemite” in order to “worship with Nature.”<sup>5</sup> Critics of environmentalism often agree that it is a form of religion—although for them it is a misguided faith. In her historical survey of ecology, Anna Bramwell concludes that, in the end, “the ecological movement” is a “global religion” that still “carries the burden of its heritage, the legacy of the crucifixion, symbol of death, suffering and self-surrender.”<sup>6</sup>

---

† Adapted from a speech given at the Case Western Reserve University School of Law, Sept. 25, 2003.

‡ Robert H. Nelson is a professor of environmental policy at the School of Public Policy of the University of Maryland. From 1975 to 1993, he was a member of the economics staff in the Office of Policy Analysis within the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

<sup>1</sup> SPIRIT AND NATURE: WHY THE ENVIRONMENT IS A RELIGIOUS ISSUE (Steven C. Rockefeller & John C. Elder eds., 1992). Rockefeller and Elder state that: “The global environmental crisis, which threatens not only the future of human civilization but all life on earth, is fundamentally a moral and religious problem.” *Id.* at 1.

<sup>2</sup> JOSEPH L. SAX, MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL PARKS 104 (1980).

<sup>3</sup> THEODORE ROSZAK, THE VOICE OF THE EARTH 101 (1992).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 51.

<sup>5</sup> RODERICK NASH, WILDERNESS AND THE AMERICAN MIND 126 (2d ed. 1973) (citation omitted).

<sup>6</sup> ANNA BRAMWELL, ECOLOGY IN THE 20TH CENTURY: A HISTORY 248 (1989).

The environmental movement today continues to draw much of its strength from a religious inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, environmentalism follows in a long tradition of religious activism in American life.<sup>8</sup> Many abolitionists, for example, lived in Puritan Massachusetts and transferred a Puritan zeal to the new task of cleansing America of the sins of slavery. The Prohibition movement to ban the sale of alcohol was also an American religious crusade. More recently, Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, led the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and appealed to the religious teachings and traditions of many congregations across the United States.

#### FOUR GREAT AWAKENINGS

Nobel Laureate, Robert Fogel, analyzed American history in terms of the influence of four great religious awakenings.<sup>9</sup> The first two—from around 1740 to 1760, and then around 1810 to 1840—were explicitly Christian in character. A third great awakening occurred in the Progressive Era, from 1890 to 1920, drawing much of its religious energy from new forms of “secular religion” as well. And, most recently, a fourth great awakening in American life began in the 1960s, including the rise of the contemporary environmental movement, and its effects are still being felt. While Fogel may give insufficient weight to certain historical factors, and certain details may still be widely debated, the general picture that he draws is largely accurate.

The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed a decline in Presbyterian, Methodist and other mainline Protestant Churches. Increasingly, American Protestants turned instead to Christian fundamentalism. Similarly, American progressivism, European democratic socialism, Russian communism, and other twentieth-century “religions of progress” lost much of their crusading zeal, with many of their former followers turning to environmentalism—a new “secu-

---

<sup>7</sup> Michael Crichton, the author of *The Andromeda Strain*, *Jurassic Park*, and other best-selling novels, stated in a 2003 speech to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco that:

Today, one of the most powerful religions in the Western World is environmentalism. Environmentalism seems to be the religion of choice for urban atheists. Why do I say a religion? Well, just look at the beliefs. If you look carefully, you see that environmentalism is in fact a perfect remapping of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths.

Michael Crichton, Remarks to the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco (Sept. 15, 2003), available at <http://www.world-nuclear.org/opinion/crichton.pdf> (site visited Sept. 17, 2004) (also on file with the author).

<sup>8</sup> See ROBERT H. ABZUG, *COSMOS CRUMBLING: AMERICAN REFORM AND THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION* (1994) (examining religious roots of American reform movements and activism generally).

<sup>9</sup> ROBERT WILLIAM FOGEL, *THE FOURTH GREAT AWAKENING & THE FUTURE OF EGALITARIANISM* (2000).

lar fundamentalism”—that has close parallels to some forms of Christian fundamentalism.<sup>10</sup>

Christian fundamentalists, for example, worry about the genetic manipulation of the human body (cloning, stem cells, etc.), while environmental fundamentalists are concerned with genetic manipulations of the natural world (genetically modified crops, etc). In both cases, there is a concern that modern science may be going “too far,” posing a threat to core religious and human values of many Americans. By historic standards, scientific and economic progress has succeeded in making very large numbers of Americans very well off, but as the Protestant theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin taught, and as environmentalism now reiterates, there are grave dangers in the excessive pursuit of wealth and riches. Taking those dangers and concerns seriously, contemporary fundamentalism in both its traditional Christian and newer environmental forms exhibits a pessimism at the turn of the century concerning the human capacity to transform the world for the better.

To be sure, environmentalism is a large and diverse movement.<sup>11</sup> There are many varieties of environmental religion, just as there are multiple understandings of the Christian faith. Although many environmentalists now question the claims for modern “progress,” some environmental groups still follow in the older “progressive” traditions associated with the third great awakening in the early part of the twentieth century. Resources for the Future (RFF) in Washington, D.C. is often described as a “moderate” environmental organization. It is largely staffed by economists who are often at odds with environmental “true believers.” Indeed, some of the RFF staff may be progressive true believers, that is, followers in the religion of economic progress, now redefined to include greater attention to environmental amenities in the overall economic calculus.

There are also branches of environmentalism that probably do not involve any significant religious convictions at all. Desires to reduce cancer rates and otherwise to improve public health, or to breathe cleaner air, for example, are not religious beliefs in themselves.

---

<sup>10</sup> See ROBERT ROYAL, *THE VIRGIN AND THE DYNAMO: USE AND ABUSE OF RELIGION IN ENVIRONMENTAL DEBATES* (1999). Royal states that environmentalism involves “[a] type of fundamentalism about the goodness of creation . . . . [T]he human dominion over creation spoken of in Genesis is all hubris and foolishness compared with the state of nature” as environmentalism sees it existing before the fall in the Garden of Eden. *Id.* at 8.

<sup>11</sup> See STEPHEN FOX, *THE AMERICAN CONSERVATION MOVEMENT: JOHN MUIR AND HIS LEGACY*, at x (University of Wisconsin Press 1985) (1981) (discussing “the role of the amateur radical that Muir so epitomized”); RICE ODELL, *ENVIRONMENTAL AWAKENING: THE NEW REVOLUTION TO PROTECT THE EARTH* xi (1980) (arguing that “environmentalists must become more relevant to the lives of more Americans”).

Some environmental groups like Environmental Defense arguably offer a mixture of the newer environmental and the older economic gospels. Environmental Defense has been a leader in seeking the use of economic methods in the service of environmental causes, while often proclaiming a “doom and gloom” message that is characteristic both of Christian preaching and much of today’s environmentalism.

More evidence of the religious side of environmentalism can be seen in the fundraising letters of environmental organizations. The motto of the Wilderness Society is “in wildness is the preservation of the world”—that is to say, human beings will be saved by experiences of the wilderness that testify to the existence and powers of God. A recent fundraising letter from the Wilderness Society warned that environmental policies are being shaped by the “Big Oil companies” that are engaged in “the sacrificing of priceless resources for profits.” In their view, the money changers have once again invaded the temple. The Wilderness Society declares it “an outrage” and calls for individuals to step forward to “stop the current administration from destroying our last wild places”—places where private greed now threatens to have a “devastating impact.”<sup>12</sup>

Allowing for some differences in metaphor, Billy Graham has preached much the same message: the evidence of greed and other human sinfulness is everywhere in the world; only heroic exertions by the faithful can avert the full triumph of evil on earth. The parallels were obvious many years ago to John McPhee, a longtime writer for the *New Yorker* who followed leading American environmentalist, David Brower, for several months. McPhee concluded that there was “something evangelical about Brower” and his environmental “sermons.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Brower’s message and delivery reminded McPhee of “the Reverend Dr. Billy Graham’s exhortations to sinners to come forward and be saved now because if you go away without making a decision for Christ coronary thrombosis may level you before you reach the exit.”<sup>14</sup> But if Graham perhaps won more individual converts, Brower and his followers in the environmental movement have had more influence on public policy.

Admittedly, when they testify before Congress, or seek to reach skeptical audiences, the leaders of environmental organizations usu-

---

<sup>12</sup> Fundraising letter from The Wilderness Society received by the author, October 2003 (on file with the author).

<sup>13</sup> JOHN MCPHEE, ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARCHDRUID 72 (1971). Brower was the executive director of the Sierra Club from 1952 to 1969. A follower in the path of John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, Brower was arguably the leading environmental preacher of the second half of the twentieth century.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

ally suppress the most overt religious elements in their thinking. They understand that many Americans are nervous about mixing religion and government. Nevertheless, American environmental groups derive much of their moral energy, their funding, their sense of purpose and their crusading drive from an “environmental fundamentalism” that has grown up out of the fourth great religious awakening.

### ENVIRONMENTAL VERSUS ECONOMIC RELIGION

Environmentalism is partly a reaction against what it sees as the excesses of modern optimism. It is therefore useful to consider briefly some of the main tenets of “economic religion” against which environmentalism often reacts so strongly today. As a leading environmental philosopher once put it, there are a host of good reasons that explain “why environmentalists hate mainstream economists.”<sup>15</sup> Economists may not quite reciprocate these strong feelings—being an older and more jaded group—but they have been some of the leading critics of the environmental movement.<sup>16</sup>

In the third great awakening, during the Progressive Era, the most powerful new religious force was the “gospel of efficiency.”<sup>17</sup> American historian, Samuel Haber, wrote that the Progressive Era was characterized by an “efficiency craze” that represented “a secular Great Awakening.”<sup>18</sup> And political scientist, Dwight Waldo, commented on what an “amazing . . . position of dominance ‘efficiency’ assumed, how it waxed until it had assimilated or over-shadowed other values, how men and events came to be degraded or exalted according to what was assumed to be its dictate.”<sup>19</sup> In the Progressive Era, “efficient” and “inefficient” seemed to replace the older Christian categories of “good” and “evil.” Efficiency was so important because it measured economic progress and, as J. B. Bury wrote in 1932, the idea of progress “belongs to the same order of ideas as

<sup>15</sup> Bryan G. Norton, *Thoreau's Insect Analogies: Or, Why Environmentalists Hate Mainstream Economists*, 13 ENVTL. ETHICS 235, 247 (1991) (capitalization omitted from heading).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., WILFRED BECKERMAN, A POVERTY OF REASON: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, at x (2002) (arguing that “[t]he only development that is sustainable now is development that enables people to live together peacefully”); JULIAN L. SIMON, THE ULTIMATE RESOURCE 3 (1981) (asserting that “natural resources have been becoming *less* scarce over the long run”).

<sup>17</sup> See SAMUEL P. HAYS, CONSERVATION AND THE GOSPEL OF EFFICIENCY: THE PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT, 1890–1920 (1959).

<sup>18</sup> SAMUEL HABER, EFFICIENCY AND UPLIFT: SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1890–1920 ix (1964).

<sup>19</sup> DWIGHT WALDO, THE ADMINISTRATIVE STATE: A STUDY OF THE POLITICAL THEORY OF AMERICAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION 19–20 (1984).

Providence or personal immortality . . . . Belief in it is an act of faith.”<sup>20</sup>

The progressive gospel was grounded in a faith in the redeeming benefits of scientific and economic progress. Underlying it all were a few core elements of theological logic.<sup>21</sup> Economic religion preached that sin in the world had been caused by material factors. Why have people so often behaved badly? If it comes down to a choice between lying and stealing, or letting your own children starve, most people will choose to lie and steal. Likewise, nations go to war with one another for economic reasons—they are fighting for control over scarce resources. In short, progressive faith assumes that the true causes of sinful behavior in the world are ultimately economic. By contrast, the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden came to be viewed as just another ancient myth that preceded the modern era of “enlightenment.”

If the progressive assumption is true, if evil in the world arises from material causes, it creates a whole new possibility for saving the world. Moreover, this redemptive outcome can be achieved independent of the actions of any god or other supernatural force. In the modern age, as economic religion preached, scientific and economic progress created the prospect of abolishing material scarcity for the first time in human history. Then, if scarcity could be eliminated, the real cause of sin in the world would be eliminated as well, leading to a new paradise on earth.

Following this line of thinking, if the path of salvation is economic, then the members of the economics profession are logically a kind of modern priesthood, the moral guides and guardians of American society.<sup>22</sup> Such progressive beliefs were widely shared across much of the world in the late nineteenth century and through much of the twentieth century. In Marxism, for instance, the laws of economic history were said to predestine the triumph of the proletariat and the arrival of a new heaven on earth. Theologian Paul Tillich once said that Marx was “the most successful of all theologians” since the Protestant Reformation—at least in terms of historical impact, if not the logical quality of his thought.<sup>23</sup> Another distinguished theologian

---

<sup>20</sup> J.B. BURY, *THE IDEA OF PROGRESS* 4 (1932).

<sup>21</sup> See ROBERT H. NELSON, *ECONOMICS AS RELIGION: FROM SAMUELSON TO CHICAGO AND BEYOND* 23 (2001) (describing the “tenets of economic faith”).

<sup>22</sup> See MICHAEL A. BERNSTEIN, *A PERILOUS PROGRESS: ECONOMISTS AND PUBLIC PURPOSE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA* 114 (2001) (noting that “American economists had demonstrated an ever-more-impressive ability to serve the needs of the state while at the same time pushing forward the intellectual (and indeed institutional) sophistication of their discipline”).

<sup>23</sup> PAUL TILlich, *A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT: FROM ITS JUDAIC AND*

surmised that “Marxism was in a real sense a Judaeo-Christian heresy” whose appeal lay in “its affirmation of certain prophetic emphases of the biblical tradition, especially the demand for justice and brotherhood.”<sup>24</sup> In an age when scientific knowledge was undermining traditional Christian belief for many people, large numbers turned to the “scientific laws of history” as a barely disguised substitute for the traditional Christian God,<sup>25</sup> and Marxism offers a graphic example of how secular ideas can take the place of traditional religion and ultimately become a new, modern form of religion.<sup>26</sup>

When I speak of contemporary environmentalism as a religion, it is in the same sense that Marxism is a religion (recognizing, of course, large differences in the specific theologies). In describing a set of secular ideas as a religion, I am following a well-trodden path that includes many theologians of the past century.<sup>27</sup> Although most students of theology are familiar with the idea of “secular religion,” many social scientists and other professionals have given little thought to the possibility that their own professional ideas may be suffused with religious content.<sup>28</sup>

HELLENISTIC ORIGINS TO EXISTENTIALISM 476 (1967).

<sup>24</sup> JAMES HASTINGS NICHOLS, *HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY, 1650-1950, SECULARIZATION OF THE WEST* 243 (1956).

<sup>25</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre declares that “Marxism shares in good measure both the content and the functions of Christianity as an interpretation of human existence, and it does so because it is the historical successor of Christianity.” ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *MARXISM AND CHRISTIANITY* 6 (1984).

<sup>26</sup> In the Marxist interpretation, everything that happens in history is caused by class conflict—and thus has a material cause, like other economic religions. The underlying reality of history is entirely economic; all ideas in the mind, for example, are a superstructure of false consciousness. Religion is one more form of such false consciousness, a byproduct rather than a driving force in history. In effect, for Marx, the laws of economics take the place of God. And what do the laws of economics do? They bring the triumph of the proletariat and the abolition of class conflict, of government, and of property—in other words, the arrival of heaven on earth. It is the millennium arrived at, not by divine intervention in the biblical sense, but by the workings of the laws of economic history. It is a new rendition of an ancient biblical story, now presented in secular terms, as a scientific truth. Its actual biblical source, of course, is why it had such a powerful appeal in western civilization. Marxism adapted biblical themes to “scientific” language, and in this way had conquered for a time a large part of the world. See THOMAS SOWELL, *MARXISM: PHILOSOPHY AND ECONOMICS* (1985).

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., WILLIS B. GLOVER, *BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF MODERN SECULAR CULTURE: AN ESSAY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF WESTERN HISTORY* (1984); AREND TH. VAN LEEUWEN, *CHRISTIANITY IN WORLD HISTORY: THE MEETING OF THE FAITHS OF EAST AND WEST* (1964).

<sup>28</sup> Some social scientists, to be sure, show a much greater awareness in this respect. See, e.g., ARTHUR J. VIDICH & SANFORD M. LYMAN, *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY: WORLDLY REJECTIONS OF RELIGION AND THEIR DIRECTIONS* xi (1985) (acknowledging that “[f]rom the beginning social thought in the United States had its roots in Christian religion, especially Protestantism”).



## THE DAM AND THE WILDERNESS

As I have said, the American progressive movement sought to advance the goals of a powerful, secular religion of economic progress. It was based on the new power of human beings to control nature, and this power had been created by modern science and economics. Progressive religion also had its artwork and cathedrals that served to provide "religious" inspiration. Many Americans visited dams like the Hoover Dam on the Colorado River or the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River. Such modern pilgrims experienced a sense of awe and reverence at the dramatic evidence before them of the new-found power to control nature for human benefit. With this power, as it appeared to many, human beings were no longer dependent on God to save the world but could achieve this wonderful outcome through their own actions.

It is easy to forget that the current era of human control over nature commenced only 150 to 200 years ago. It was not until the Progressive Era that American intellectuals first sought to address the full implications for the future. If the initial response was a burst of optimism, today the reaction is often more pessimistic. David Brower declared, "I hate all dams, large and small,"<sup>29</sup> not because he was concerned that many dams were pork barrel spending projects that served narrow interest groups and could not pass a simple cost-benefit test. Rather, he hated dams for the very fact that they symbolized a new human power to control nature—the very opposite of the old progressive feeling of reverence in the presence of a dam. For many environmentalists like Brower, a symbol of human control over nature fills them with disgust and regret, and in recent years that sentiment and environmental antagonism toward dams has been successful. Congress is still fully addicted to pork barrel spending in other areas, but it has largely stopped funding new dams.

By contrast, economists by and large are still true believers in progressive religion. This helps to explain the tensions between economists and environmentalists who are waging a new kind of religious warfare—fortunately without bloodshed.<sup>30</sup> There are now, for example, "anti-progressive" symbols that have become central religious objects in American life. In the theology of environmentalism, wilderness areas are the new "cathedrals." Like a dam, a wilderness area makes a symbolic statement about the goal to be sought in the rela-

---

<sup>29</sup> MCPHEE, *supra* note 13, at 140.

<sup>30</sup> As ROYAL states, "[I]n the modern environmental debate, those who would permit use and those who advocate wilderness preservation have become virtual warring denominations." ROYAL, *supra* note 10, at 14.

tionship between humanity and nature. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines "wilderness" as an area "untrammeled by man," and any signs of a past human presence should be at a minimum.<sup>31</sup> So rather than seeking greater control over nature, a wilderness area renounces such human powers. Thus, protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska is so important to many environmentalists precisely because it is seen as one of the last remaining places on earth that is still "untouched by man." Economic religion for much of the twentieth century exalted human control over nature; environmental religion today expresses an opposite view—symbolically at least.

### A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD

Why has this large shift in religious thinking taken place? One reason is that the products of science have proven less unambiguously beneficial than the true believers in economic progress once advertised. The development of modern chemicals, for example, was regarded initially as a wonderful scientific blessing with agents like DDT helping to eradicate malaria over many parts of the world. But it then became clear that DDT and other toxic chemicals were poisoning some of America's most important bird wildlife,<sup>32</sup> and the modern spread of industry and commerce over the entire globe was wiping out vast areas of plant and animal habitat, and threatening many species with extinction.

The powers of modern science and economics were proving to be a mixed blessing in other areas as well. The Holocaust, for example, was perhaps the most troubling and symbolically powerful event of the twentieth century. There had been terrible bursts of anti-Semitism in Europe before, but they had never been married to the economic efficiency of the modern world. Then, the atom bomb and the control over nuclear energy raised a previously unimaginable possibility: the extinction of the human race by its own hand. Whereas the progressive true believers had assumed that modern science and economics would bring a new heaven on earth, it now occurred to many people that the result could instead be a new hell on earth.<sup>33</sup>

There are close affinities between environmentalism and the current war on terrorism. Both attempt to protect the world from possible negative consequences of scientific and economic powers. Modern scientific and economic developments have given very small

---

<sup>31</sup> 16 U.S.C. §1131(c) (2000).

<sup>32</sup> See RACHEL CARSON, *SILENT SPRING* 1-2 (1962) (predicting that continued use of DDT threatened birds).

<sup>33</sup> KENNETH E. BOULDING, *BEYOND ECONOMICS: ESSAYS ON SOCIETY, RELIGION AND ETHICS* 210-11 (1968).

groups of people (perhaps even lone individuals) the potential to harm an entire society. Modern airplanes, for example, have seemingly become a double edged sword. They have dramatically reduced travel times around the world, but those same planes, as we have so tragically witnessed, can be used to destroy the World Trade Center. Likewise, in Bhopal, India, where large industrial chemical plants produced pesticides aimed at developing India's agricultural productivity, the mistakes of a few Union Carbide employees were capable of killing thousands of people, and it is now widely feared that a small cell of terrorists might someday use those same kinds of chemicals to kill thousands more.

The war on drugs offers still another comparison. If environmentalism is concerned with the misuse of chemicals in the external environment, the war on drugs is concerned with their misuse in the human body's "internal environment." Cocaine, heroin, LSD, amphetamines, and so forth are all products of modern scientific discovery. They are also capable of changing nature, in this case, the human nature found in the biological workings of the mind. Where environmentalism seeks to protect the physical world from "unnatural" contamination, the war on drugs seeks to protect the individual from a similar, unnatural fate.

Environmentalism, terrorism, and the war on drugs are having a great cumulative impact on American life. Government policies often reflect the deep fears that have been aroused in a nation, and in many cases the symbolic value in dealing with these concerns is just as important as the practical result—partly because it may be difficult to do anything practically effective in areas of such great public concern. Symbolism has played an important role, for example, in the debate over the future of nuclear power. Many people react to a proposal to build a nuclear power plant much as David Brower reacted to a dam—they hate the idea no matter what its practical benefits might be. The advocates of nuclear power today suggest that with new technologies it may be possible to construct power plants that are cheap and completely safe, not even theoretically capable of a meltdown or other catastrophe. Nevertheless, even though nuclear power might be economically advantageous and would not emit any greenhouse gases, there is minimal public support. Nuclear power is not just a source of energy but perhaps the ultimate symbol of the new dangers to the world associated with the rise of modern science and industry.

From some perspectives, these widespread public fears may appear "irrational." After all, science is here to stay, and the scientific developments of the modern age are irreversible. Although science may be

a double-edged sword, unless the world is prepared to return to a caveman-like existence with a total population of perhaps 50 million people, it will be necessary to rely on scientific powers exerted to control nature. The environmental movement has usefully questioned the powerful value assumptions and the unqualified optimism of economic religion, but it is less obvious that the environmental movement has offered much in the way of workable ideas for actually shaping a "post-modern" world.

#### ENVIRONMENTALISM AND LIBERTARIANISM

The likely consequences of the new human powers over nature can not be separated from the political institutions that will oversee the use of these powers. Here again, the history of the twentieth century was often discouraging for progressive true believers. In environmental and other areas of concern there was a sharp loss of confidence in the capacity of governments to act "in the public interest"—or even to identify any such set of generally accepted goals within a large nation state. Modern science and economics were making it possible for governments to put nature to use for human purposes, and yet these governments seemed unable to exercise such new large powers over nature with appropriate care and responsibility.

Interestingly, libertarians, seldom associated with environmentalism, reacted with a similar concern over the impact of the newly powerful, twentieth-century governments on the future of human freedom.<sup>34</sup> Here again, the history of the twentieth century offered deep cause for concern. In the worst cases, heads of state like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin killed millions of their own citizens—their ability to do so magnified by modern scientific and economic "advance."

Economic religion, along with other outgrowths of progressive optimism, had advertised a wonderful future. Progressive government would not only be powerful, but also scientific, skillful, efficient, and fair. By the end of the twentieth century, however, those progressive hopes seemed utopian. Libertarians were among the most vocal in proclaiming that the progressive vision was another episode in a long history of human folly chasing an impossible dream of human perfection on earth.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> See Robert H. Nelson, *Is "Libertarian Environmentalist" an Oxymoron?: The Crisis of Progressive Faith and the Environmental and Libertarian Search for a New Guiding Vision*, in *THE NEXT WEST: PUBLIC LANDS, COMMUNITY AND ECONOMY IN THE AMERICAN WEST* 209 (John A. Baden & Donald Snow eds., 1997) (discussing the libertarian assertion that scientific management of society has failed its purposes).

<sup>35</sup> See F. A. HAYEK, *THE FATAL CONCEIT: THE ERRORS OF SOCIALISM* x-xi (W.W. Bartley III ed., University of Chicago Press 1989) (1988) (examining the impact of the market order on

Although economic religion might speak of marrying modern technology with modern industry for the salvation of all mankind, the reality was that control over the new modern instruments of scientific and economic power rested with ordinary politicians. Scientific and economic developments had greatly escalated the stakes with respect to the decision-making capabilities of government, but there seemingly had been no corresponding improvements in governing skills. Environmentalists feared for the future of the natural world, and even for the future of human existence on earth. Libertarians feared for the future of human rights and other individual freedoms. They were seeing two sides of the same coin—modern governments had come into the possession of enormous new powers, and yet there was little in the functioning of these governments to inspire confidence.<sup>36</sup>

### ENVIRONMENTAL CALVINISM

Environmentalism is more than simply a reaction against the progressive gospel of efficiency. It has deep roots in western religion that precede the rise of secular gospels in the modern age. The founders of the Massachusetts colony in the seventeenth century were Puritans, the English branch of Calvinism. Throughout American history, the Puritan influence in American life has been extraordinary.<sup>37</sup> Even today, the United States remains to a remarkable degree a Puritan nation—although the most influential forms of Puritanism are now to be found in secular forms of religion. As historian Mark Stoll observes, “[t]he moral urgency that animates the environmental movement is also a direct legacy of Calvinism and Puritanism . . . . The activist wing of environmentalism traces its roots through the Puritans directly to God’s holy self-appointed instruments, the committed Calvinists.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, contemporary environmentalism is aptly described as “Calvinism minus God.”<sup>39</sup>

---

the development of civilization); *see also* FRIEDRICH A. HAYEK, *THE ROAD TO SERFDOM* vi (1944) (discussing the surrender of individual rights in the quest for an effective government).

<sup>36</sup> *See* JAMES C. SCOTT, *SEEING LIKE A STATE: HOW CERTAIN SCHEMES TO IMPROVE THE HUMAN CONDITION HAVE FAILED* 2 (1998) (discussing the shortcomings of postmodern states).

<sup>37</sup> *See* KEVIN PHILLIPS, *THE COUSIN’S WARS: RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THE TRIUMPH OF ANGLO-AMERICA*, at xv (1999) (discussing the three sequences of Puritanism in America and their cultural impact).

<sup>38</sup> MARK STOLL, *PROTESTANTISM, CAPITALISM AND NATURE IN AMERICA* 49 (1997); *see also* H. PAUL SANTMIRE, *THE TRAVAIL OF NATURE: THE AMBIGUOUS ECOLOGICAL PROMISE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY* (1985). Santmire finds that:

Calvin can be quite exuberant in his praise of nature’s beauty in itself. The created world, he says, is God’s “most beautiful theatre.” . . . The creation, he says, is “quite like a spacious and splendid house, provided and filled with the most exquisite and at the same time the most abundant furnishings.” Everything tells us of God, Calvin

Christianity preaches a message of the relationship of human beings and nature. In the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, human beings existed in happy harmony with a joyous, abundant nature. It was only after the Fall that humans had to kill animals for food, and that constant strife and discord afflicted the relationships among human beings themselves. Any new claims to know the correct relationship between human beings and nature will thus fall within a long tradition of theological pronouncements on such topics, and it should not be surprising that environmental thought in this respect often follows closely after the teachings of Christianity. For almost two millennia, the message of Christianity reached into every corner of western civilization. Just as Marxism, despite its strident claims to the contrary, was in many respects a secular restatement of the Judeo-Christian message, environmentalism today inevitably has been influenced heavily by the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West.<sup>40</sup>

In contemporary environmentalism, one learns again of an excess of human pride, a human desire to possess forms of knowledge that must be reserved to God alone, and of punishments that God will inflict on sinful creatures who have violated His commands. The source of temptation, to be sure, is no longer a snake in the Garden. It is modern science and economics that have led humans to believe that they can assume God-like powers on their own. Indeed, many modern men and women have ceased to believe in God at all, in effect substituting their own thoughts and actions in place of God.

In the beginning, as Christianity has long taught, God created the world according to His plan.<sup>41</sup> Modern human beings, however, are

writes lyrically—and here he presents us with a picture of not only a world charged with divinity, but also a world which carries the stamp of the divine glory in its very being.

*Id.* at 128.

<sup>39</sup> Robert H. Nelson, *Calvinism Minus God*, FORBES, October 5, 1998, at 143; Robert H. Nelson, *Calvinism Minus God: Environmental Restoration as a Theological Concept*, in SAVING THE SEAS: VALUES, SCIENTISTS AND INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE 87 (L. Anathia Brooks & Stacy VanDeVeer eds., 1997); Robert H. Nelson, *Environmental Calvinism: The Judeo-Christian Roots of Environmental Theology*, in TAKING THE ENVIRONMENT SERIOUSLY 252 (Roger E. Meiners & Bruce Yandle eds., 1993).

<sup>40</sup> See ARTHUR A. EKIRCH, JR., MAN AND NATURE IN AMERICA 11-12 (1963) (addressing the New England Puritans' disdain for participating in outdoor sports and hunting for pleasure).

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Migliore, a professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, observes that

creation may be called 'necessary'—that is, in the sense that God creates in total consistency with God's nature. Creation fittingly expresses the true character of God . . . . Creation is not an arbitrary act, something God just decided to do on a whim, as it were. On the contrary, God is true and faithful to God's own nature in the act of creation.

DANIEL L. MIGLIORE, FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING: AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN

now acting to remake the natural world according to their own designs. One might say that human beings in the modern age have come to “play God,” and in the Christian tradition there can be no greater sin. In the Bible, when God’s authority is challenged, the outcome is certain—the challenger will soon be struck down and punished severely.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the punishment in the Old Testament generally takes the form of an environmental calamity such as a great flood, an earthquake, a famine, or an outbreak of disease. As we learn in Genesis, Noah had to build his Ark because God was causing a giant flood to cover all the earth—a just punishment for the sinful ways into which His people had fallen.

And now, as many environmentalists fear, modern humanity can expect a similar set of punishments.<sup>43</sup> Mankind has again challenged God, and new environmental calamities will soon befall the earth. Consider the message of global warming as delivered by the environmental movement. With the rise of modern industry and the resulting rise in carbon dioxide emissions and other greenhouse chemicals into the atmosphere, human actions have changed the earth’s climate. But the world’s climate is a domain that must be reserved to God. For this transgression, as the Bible tells us, human beings can expect to pay a large price. Indeed, environmentalists predict future punishments virtually biblical in character.<sup>44</sup> As a result of global warming, the oceans will rise and the earth will flood. With higher temperatures parching the land, and crops no longer suited to their

THEOLOGY 85 (1991).

<sup>42</sup> Migliore states that God is offended by “the sin of *presumption*, the violent effort to bring in God’s Kingdom with or without God. In this spirit of presumption and violence, there is limitless confidence in ourselves and our goodness.” *Id.* at 134. Commenting further on the essence of sin, Migliore observes that:

We misunderstand the depth of sin if we see it only as a violation of a moral code; it is, instead, primarily the disruption of our relationship with God . . . . This disruption . . . that is the essence of sin appears in vastly different forms . . . . Sin may take the form of rejecting God’s grace and absolutizing ourselves. Declaring our freedom to be infinite, we proclaim ourselves God. This is the sin of the prideful, titanic, egocentric self . . . . In our insecurity, we seek to be our own God.

*Id.* at 130-131.

<sup>43</sup> BJORN LOMBORG, *THE SKEPTICAL ENVIRONMENTALIST: MEASURING THE REAL STATE OF THE WORLD* 3-4 (2001); GREGG EASTERBROOK, *A MOMENT ON THE EARTH: THE COMING AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL OPTIMISM*, at xxi (1995) (remarking that “[t]here was a time when to cry alarm regarding environmental affairs was the daring position,” whereas now “[p]eople get upset when you say things may turn out fine”).

<sup>44</sup> In 1992, Al Gore warned that “artificial global warming” was looming and “it threatens to destroy the climate equilibrium we have known for the entire history of human civilization. As the climate pattern begins to change, so too do the movements of the wind and rain, the floods and droughts, the grasslands and deserts, the insects and weeds, the feasts and famines, the seasons of peace and war”—all such changes greatly for the worse. SENATOR AL GORE, *EARTH IN THE BALANCE: ECOLOGY AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT* 98 (1992).

current locations, new famines will threaten the world. As the earth's climate heats up, malaria and other diseases will worsen and yield a new spread of pestilence.

Economist Robert Mendelsohn takes a much different perspective on global warming.<sup>45</sup> Higher average temperatures in Canada and Siberia, he argues, will open up large new areas for human settlement and more productive agriculture. In the United States, people have been moving south for the past half-century in search of warmer weather. For the majority of Americans, the snow and ice of northern winters are something to be left behind. If the climate of the earth warmed somewhat, they would be able to enjoy milder winters without having to move. Indeed, taking the full impact of global warming into account, Mendelsohn estimates that the United States, Europe, Russia, China and Japan—essentially the entire temperate zone of the northern hemisphere—would benefit from a moderate degree of global warming.<sup>46</sup>

There might indeed be greater economic benefits than costs from a global warming within the range of the most likely predictions. Such arguments, however, have hardly influenced the thinking of contemporary environmentalism. They are essentially non-arguments that do not deserve any serious attention from environmental theologians—no attempt need even be made to refute them. In environmental religion, global warming is a sin against God, not to be assessed in terms of economic calculations of possible costs and benefits. Likewise, nuclear power and genetically altering crops are other dramatic examples of human beings playing God, and they evoke powerful moral responses that have little to do with any economic considerations.

The Endangered Species Act<sup>47</sup>—a modern Noah's Ark, as some have called it—seeks to stop another activity in which humans seem to play God: causing the extinction of species. According to the Act, there is no limit to the social costs that must be incurred to ensure the

---

<sup>45</sup> See GLOBAL WARMING AND THE AMERICAN ECONOMY 3 (Robert Mendelsohn ed., 2001) (stating that climate changes will impact the economy in more varying proportions than previously believed); GLOBAL WARMING AND THE ASIAN PACIFIC 4-5 (Ching-Cheng Chang, Dai Gee Shaw, and Robert Mendelsohn eds., 2003) (stating that as science has improved, the understanding of the effects of global warming have changed, citing specific sectors of the economy as now being more vulnerable to global warming); ROBERT MENDELSON, THE GREENING OF GLOBAL WARMING 3 (1999) (recognizing that new ideas about the effect and impact of global warming have developed due to new economic and scientific studies); THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON THE UNITED STATES ECONOMY 1 (Robert Mendelsohn & James Neumann eds., 1999) (stating that "there is a growing consensus among economists that near-term reductions in greenhouse gases could result in substantial costs").

<sup>46</sup> Robert Mendelsohn, *The Peculiar Economics of Global Warming*, THE MILKIN INST. REV., June 2000, at 35.

<sup>47</sup> Endangered Species Act of 1973, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1531-1544 (2000).



survival of every plant and animal species in the United States. After all, in respecting a command of God, there is no room for crass political and economic compromise.

Strip mining alters the mountain-scape, dams divert the course of great rivers, pollution changes the chemical composition of the atmosphere, and toxic chemicals contaminate the soil. Such God-like acts were impossible until very recently. For the past 150 years, however, humans have been able to remake the natural world. From the perspective of environmental religion, they are overstepping their proper bounds, and God will be offended. Indeed, as the Bible foretells, the wrath of God will soon be upon us, and it may well take the form of an environmental disaster.

Of course, in the modern age, science displaced religion as an ultimate source of authority for many people. So although biblical prophecies are frequently offered as "scientific predictions," old-fashioned religion today merely masquerades as modern science, but no one should be fooled.

#### DEFACING THE BOOK OF NATURE

Contemporary environmentalism displays its roots in Christian religion in other respects as well. According to Puritan theology there were two "Books" that provided a valid knowledge of God and his ways. The most important, of course, was the Book of the Bible, which Puritans were required to study. Another key source for knowing God was the "Book of Nature."<sup>48</sup> Puritans encouraged the study of the natural world as a religious exercise. When Henry David Thoreau moved to Walden Pond for two years, he was following a path already blazed by his Puritan Massachusetts predecessors.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> See DR. ABRAHAM KUYPER, *Calvinism & Science*, in LECTURES ON CALVINISM 110 (1931). These lectures were originally delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898. Kuyper—a Dutch Calvinist himself—noted that in Calvinism "cosmical life [in nature] has regained its worth not at the expense of things eternal, but by virtue of its capacity as God's handiwork and as a revelation of God's attributes." *Id.* at 120. For Calvin, as Kuyper writes:

[I]nstead of simply treating Nature as an accessorial item as so many Theologians were inclined to do, [Calvin] was accustomed to compare the Scriptures to a pair of spectacles, enabling us to decipher again the divine Thoughts, written by God's Hand in the book of *Nature* . . . Thus vanished every dread possibility that he who occupied himself with nature was wasting his capacities in pursuit of vain and idle things. It was perceived, on the contrary, that for God's sake, our attention may not be withdrawn from the life of nature and creation . . .

*Id.* at 120-21.

<sup>49</sup> HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS* 55 (Stanley Appelbaum ed., Dover Thrift Edition 1995) (1854). For the theological transition from older New England theology to Thoreau, Emerson and transcendentalism, see PERRY MILLER, *ERRAND INTO THE WILDERNESS* (1984).

Until the nineteenth century, it was generally believed that the earth existed as it originally had been created. There was no thought that the earth might be four billion years old, or that it had been transformed by vast geological upheavals and the continuing biological evolution of plant and animal species. Thus, in visiting nature mankind encountered “the Creation.” Entering the world of nature was a way of experiencing the “artwork” of God.<sup>50</sup> God was not actually in nature—that would be the heresy of pantheism. However, God had created the natural world as it could be seen at that moment; its structures and shape were set in the beginning according to His design. Thus, as a “Book” written by God, nature revealed important qualities about God, making it a kind of wonderful cathedral, literally the product of God’s own handiwork at the Creation.

John Muir, born before Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, seemingly was little influenced by the new Darwinism as it spread throughout the nineteenth century with a revolutionary intellectual force. For Muir, the rocks, plants and other features of the natural world were “the terrestrial manifestations of God,”<sup>51</sup> and visiting wild nature was like finding a “window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator.”<sup>52</sup> Writing about the Sierra wilderness, Muir declared that “everything in it seems equally divine—one smooth, pure, wild glow of Heaven’s love.”<sup>53</sup> The trees in nature were “psalm-singing”; the primeval forests were “temples,” and both were devices by which God had chosen to communicate with human beings.<sup>54</sup> Going to a wild area for Muir revealed the “fundamental truths of existence.”<sup>55</sup> As historian Roderick Nash has commented, “wild nature provided the best ‘conductor of divinity’ because it was least associated with man’s artificial constructs.”<sup>56</sup>

In current environmental religion, although there are fewer explicit references to “God,” nature is still commonly spoken of in moral, religious tones. Environmental writings are filled with statements of the urgent need to protect “the Creation.” Al Gore has declared that human beings must show “a new moral courage to choose higher values” that will better protect the environment and thus act to secure “our place within creation.”<sup>57</sup> Bruce Babbitt, as the former Secretary

---

<sup>50</sup> SANTMIRE, *supra* note 38, at 10-11.

<sup>51</sup> NASH, *supra* note 5, at 125 (citation omitted).

<sup>52</sup> *Id.* (citation omitted).

<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 126 (citation omitted).

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 125 (citation omitted).

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 126.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* (citation omitted).

<sup>57</sup> Al Gore, *Our Global Eco-Blindness: Earth’s Fate is the No. 1 National Security Issue*, WASH. POST, May 14, 1989, at C1.

of the Interior, declared that “all the plants and animals in the natural world are together a direct reflector of divinity, that creation is a plan of God.”<sup>58</sup> Moreover, since “God put them there,” there was a moral imperative that “we ought not to recklessly destroy the patterns of creation.”<sup>59</sup>

In such thinking, wilderness areas are among the last remaining places where God’s original artwork is still visible and where we can thus learn important things about the mind of God. If we were to destroy all the wilderness areas of the earth, we would in effect be defacing a “Book” by which God has revealed Himself to the world. Only the Devil could hope for such a thing. In seeking the economic development of remaining wild areas, modern men and women are thus—from the perspective of environmental religion—committing a grave sin against God, one that would even go so far as to erase some of the most important evidences of God’s own plan for the world.

#### RESTORING THE CREATION

Even if they can be preserved, today’s wild areas are a tiny remnant of the original Creation. For many environmentalists, this is not enough; they want to “restore” former wild areas that have been significantly altered by humans in the past. As with other areas of environmental thought, this goal has had a significant impact on government policy in recent years.<sup>60</sup>

The management of the national forests—containing 192 million acres, or about 10 percent of the land in the United States—offers a good example.<sup>61</sup> From 1905 and the establishment of the U.S. Forest Service in the Progressive Era until about 1990, the national forests were managed to maximize human benefit.<sup>62</sup> The reigning utilitarian philosophy of “multiple-use management” was an application of economic religion, part of the progressive gospel of efficiency<sup>63</sup> that saw

---

<sup>58</sup> Colman McCarthy, *The Noah Movement*, WASH. POST, February 10, 1996, at A23.

<sup>59</sup> *Babbitt Says Falcon May Leave Endangered List*, WASH. POST, August 26, 1998, at A2.

<sup>60</sup> See CREATION AT RISK?: RELIGION, SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTALISM (Michael Cromartie ed., 1995) (providing debate on the effectiveness of environmental public policies and regulations).

<sup>61</sup> U.S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE, REPORT OF THE FOREST SERVICE, FISCAL YEAR 2002, at 4 (May 2003) [hereinafter REPORT OF THE FOREST SERVICE]; see also GLEN O. ROBINSON, THE FOREST SERVICE: A STUDY OF PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT (1975) (presenting a historical comparative analysis of national ecosystem management); HAROLD K. STEEN, THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE: A HISTORY (1976) (applying a historical analysis of natural forests in multiple use management).

<sup>62</sup> SAMUEL TRASK DANA & SALLY K. FAIRFAX, FOREST AND RANGE POLICY: ITS DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED STATES (1980) (discussing the history of conservation and environmental management).

<sup>63</sup> ROBERT H. NELSON, PUBLIC LANDS AND PRIVATE RIGHTS: THE FAILURE OF

the national forests supply as much as 20 percent of the nation's softwood timber harvests in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 1990s, after a long political and legal struggle, however, environmental groups succeeded in displacing multiple-use management. Replacing an economic creed, they substituted an environmental religion. This shift, to be sure, was not officially advertised in such theological terms. Instead, religion has been disguised as science, camouflaged as the triumph of the "science" of "ecosystem management."<sup>64</sup> As ecosystem management increasingly prevailed in the 1990s, timber harvesting—an especially graphic human intrusion on wild nature—was drastically curtailed in the national forests of the United States.<sup>65</sup>

The goal of ecosystem management is sometimes said to be achieving a "natural" or a "healthy" forest.<sup>66</sup> And yet, no one can say exactly what such terms mean.<sup>67</sup> What is "health" in a forest? In practice, of course, such definitions are necessary for land management, and at least one has evolved in the national forest system. "Ecosystem management" has come to mean the restoration of a national forest condition as it existed prior to the arrival of European settlers. In California's Sierra Nevadas, for example, a team of five ecologists stated that "[e]cosystem management is an attempt to maintain the historical structural complexity and suite of processes that occurred in these ecosystems before Euro-American influence."<sup>68</sup>

SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT 43-90 (1995) (discussing the history of national forest management).

<sup>64</sup> See ALLAN K. FITZSIMMONS, *DEFENDING ILLUSIONS: FEDERAL PROTECTION OF ECOSYSTEMS* 7 (1999) (noting a shift from traditional reliance on "empirical evidence" and the "scientific method" to a new trend of "subjective" and "unverifiable" notions of "ecosystem integrity").

<sup>65</sup> In 1989, the level of timber harvest from the national forests was 12 billion board feet. By 2002, it had fallen to less than 2 billion board feet, and almost one-third of that was dead and dying "salvage timber." See ROBERT H. NELSON, *A BURNING ISSUE: A CASE FOR ABOLISHING THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE* 152 (2000) [hereinafter *A BURNING ISSUE*]; *REPORT OF THE FOREST SERVICE*, *supra* note 61, at 29. Although some timber harvesting continues, it is now largely justified as serving "ecological" purposes.

<sup>66</sup> The Forest Service states that its mission is to provide for "the health, productivity, and diversity of the natural resources on our national forests." This will require, in particular, the achievement of "healthy watersheds." *Id.* at 3. See also THE INTERAGENCY ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT TASK FORCE, *THE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH: HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIES* 1, 8 (1995).

<sup>67</sup> As Mark Sagoff notes, "although ecosystem theory has been a burgeoning academic industry since the 1950s, many ecologists believe it has failed to provide any basis or guidance for management" of lands and other natural resources. Mark Sagoff, *The Plaza and the Pendulum: Two Concepts of Ecological Science*, 18 *BIOLOGY AND PHIL.* 529, 546 (citations omitted) (2003).

<sup>68</sup> Deborah Elliot-Fisk et al., *Mediated Settlement Agreement for Sequoia National Forest, Section B. Giant Sequoia Groves: An Evaluation*, in THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS, WILDLAND RESOURCES CENTER, *STATUS OF THE SIERRA NEVADA*, ADDENDUM 277, 307

In the western United States, where most of the national forests are located, this typically means a forest condition of around 1870 to 1890. Large numbers of federal employees are now actively studying tree rings, poring over old photographs, and otherwise trying to determine the historical character of western forests as they existed in the late nineteenth century—before the “fall” from grace, so to speak, under modern economic influences.

Why is a “pre-European” condition so important that it has become the central management goal of the U.S. Forest Service? Because “pre-European” has become the operational definition of “natural.” Pre-European is the best available practical understanding of “the Creation” before it was significantly altered by human actions. The Puritans believed that the Book of Nature was second only to the Bible in revealing the thoughts of God. Over much of the West, this knowledge of original nature was erased over the past 100 years. But perhaps it has not been lost forever. If we act now, it may still be possible to restore “natural” conditions—the conditions of the Creation—as they existed in the national forests before the transforming impacts of timber harvesting, livestock grazing, mining, dam building, and other human actions of the twentieth century.

It was not only the commercial uses of the forests that transformed their character. Ironically, the greatest single impact may have resulted from the Forest Service’s suppression of forest fire through most of the twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Western forests have always been shaped by fire. Eliminating forest fires—yet another attempt to “play God” by controlling nature for human benefit—changed drastically the ecological workings of these western forests. In many cases, fire suppression resulted in a large buildup of wood that was unprecedented in historical terms. Unless the wood was used for timber harvesting, and as long as a forest fire did not remove it, more and more wood would accumulate. The western forests thus increasingly filled with small trees—or “excess fuels”—that were a kind of kindling for catastrophic forest fires.<sup>70</sup>

---

(1997); see also COMMITTEE OF SCIENTISTS, *SUSTAINING THE PEOPLE’S LANDS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STEWARDSHIP OF THE NATIONAL FORESTS AND GRASSLANDS IN THE NEXT CENTURY*, A Report to the Secretary of Agriculture and to the Chief of the Forest Service 22-23, 32-36 (1999).

<sup>69</sup> See STEPHEN J. PYNE, *FIRE IN AMERICA: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF WILDLAND AND RURAL FIRE* (1982) [hereinafter *FIRE IN AMERICA*] (stating “[t]he attempt to assimilate fire within the context of an industrial society has animated a one-hundred-year-old debate about proper fire practices”); see also STEPHEN J. PYNE, *FIRE: A BRIEF HISTORY* (William Cronon ed., 2001) (discussing the history of man’s interaction with fire).

<sup>70</sup> UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE, *WESTERN NATIONAL FORESTS:*

Beginning in the 1980s, explosive forest fires—seen, for example, in the Yellowstone National Park fires of 1988—began to sweep across the national forests more frequently. During the fire seasons of 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2002, large areas of western forests, much larger than the typical annual acreage, burned.<sup>71</sup> Restoring western forests to the conditions of 1870 would now involve two critical steps.<sup>72</sup> First, the existing large volumes of “unnatural” wood—the direct result of fire suppression—would somehow have to be removed. And, second, the historic fire regimes of the pre-twentieth century would somehow have to be reestablished.

To be sure, all of this may come close to a new form of heresy even within the framework of environmental religion. If human beings are seeking to “recreate the Creation,” perhaps it is a special way of “playing God.” Environmental heresy or not, environmental organizations today are exerting strong pressure on federal and state governments to spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to restore natural areas across the United States.

#### THEOLOGICAL CONUNDRUMS

Americans tend to think that religion is beyond public criticism; debating religion in public is widely regarded as bad form. However, this is a recent development. Discussing theological issues was once among the most honorable of human activities. It is possible to develop rational arguments about theology, as well as to test the theological arguments of others by a rational standard. The validity of specific assumptions made to support a theological argument can be questioned, and it is possible to examine and critique the logical steps taken from one theological point to the next.

If the religious goal of “recreating the Creation” is put under a lens of close theological scrutiny, it fares poorly by almost any criteria. It may, as noted, amount to “playing God” in a new context. That issue aside, in order to restore “original nature,” it is necessary to define a period in history when it can be said that a true “natural” condition existed. As noted above, the national forests in the western United States are being managed today to restore the conditions of about

---

CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRES THREATEN RESOURCES AND COMMUNITIES, REPORT NO. T-RCED-98-273, at 10 (1998) (statement of Barry T. Hill, Associate Director, Energy, Resources, and Science Issues, Resources, Community, and Economic Development Division).

<sup>71</sup> National Interagency Fire Center, *Wildland Fire Statistics, Total Fires and Acres 1960-2002*, available at <http://www.nifc.gov/stats/wildlandfirestats.html>.

<sup>72</sup> A BURNING ISSUE, *supra* note 65, at 62.

1870 to 1890. But this seems arbitrary when applied to forests that have been subject to constant change over millenia.

Moreover, in most cases there were pre-European human beings present who had occupied the national forest lands for thousands of years. In many cases these Native Americans had actively managed the forests, principally through the manipulation of fire. Indeed, the "natural" fire regimes that produced the ecological workings and the forest conditions of 1870 were often manmade fire regimes in significant part.

Thus, when John Muir imagined that he was encountering "the Creation" in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, as put in place by God, he was actually suffering from some large illusions. He was ignoring the fact that the earth had been created a very long time ago and had been through countless upheavals in the intervening years. He was also neglecting the fact that the forests had been changed "by the hand of man" in very recent times. If Muir had recognized the active management role of Native Americans, one alternative would have been to abandon the very idea of finding any natural areas at all that were "untouched by human hand," and acknowledge that there might not be any of "the Creation" left to find. Such a possibility, of course, would deal a great blow to environmental thinking, almost as if to declare that "God is dead"—an unacceptable proclamation to Muir and many of his environmentalist followers.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, the alternative is equally unacceptable—or at least it should be. It requires the reading of Native Americans out of the human race—a new "environmental racism," as it were.<sup>74</sup> As forest fire historian, Stephen Pyne, has commented, the tenets of environmental religion effectively amount to "[s]tripping American Indians of the power to shape their environment."<sup>75</sup> This is not only contrary to historical fact but is also "tantamount to dismissing their humanity."<sup>76</sup> The Calvinism of colonial Massachusetts regarded the local Indians as agents of the devil whose lives were close to worthless. The "Calvinism minus God" of the modern environmental movement comes

---

<sup>73</sup> Bill McKibben notes that "religion has been in decline in the modern era . . . . The crisis of belief continues. Many people, including me, have overcome it to a greater or lesser degree by locating God in nature." BILL MCKIBBEN, *THE END OF NATURE* 71 (1989). However, it is possible that in the future there will not be any places in which nature has not been significantly altered by human actions. If that happens, for McKibben, it would be "the end of nature," meaning perhaps "that God is dead." *Id.* at 216.

<sup>74</sup> See Robert H. Nelson, *Environmental Colonialism: "Saving" Africa from Africans*, 8 INDEP. REV. 65 (2003) (proposing that environmental conservationist policies in Africa have subjected Africans to "environmental colonialism" as local populations have been displaced and impoverished).

<sup>75</sup> STEPHEN J. PYNE, *WORLD FIRE: THE CULTURE OF FIRE ON EARTH* 244 (1995).

<sup>76</sup> *Id.*

uncomfortably close to the old Puritan dismissal of the humanity of American Indians.

Leaving aside this issue, and assuming that the goal of an 1870 forest condition is to guide government policy, there are also practical conundrums in finding a suitable means of reaching a pre-European forest condition. Consider a ponderosa pine forest, one of the most common forest types in lower to middle elevations in the interior Rocky Mountain West. Under the normal ecological workings of such forests prior to the suppression of forest fires in the twentieth century, a ponderosa forest might experience a low intensity fire as often as every 10 to 20 years.<sup>77</sup> This fire would burn out the brush and underlying new tree growth. The older and larger ponderosa pines—about 30 to 50 per acre in a common circumstance—would be undamaged by the fire, leading nineteenth-century visitors to speak of the “open” conditions of the forests.<sup>78</sup>

Today, however, because of past fire suppression, a dense thicket of small trees—often 300 to 500 trees per acre—has often grown up.<sup>79</sup> In order to restore a “natural” condition, these trees must somehow be removed. A “prescribed burn” is one option, but in many cases the whole forest might erupt into an unprecedented conflagration. Prescribed burning would also create offensive and potentially harmful air pollution, a side effect that often arouses strong public resistance. Even if new burning is possible, as Stephen Pyne observes, “[t]he return of natural fire to wildlands is less likely to ‘restore’ an ancient landscape than it is to fashion a landscape that has never before existed.”<sup>80</sup>

A second option is to cut down the small trees, or remove them by “mechanical thinning,” as it is sometimes called. But unless an economical use for the trees can be found, it would be very expensive to remove billions of trees over tens of millions of acres of national forest. If the trees are put to a profitable use, mechanical thinning becomes essentially a new form of timber harvesting with an environmental as well as an ordinary commercial purpose. To environmental religion, however, any revival of timber harvesting—for whatever reason—is unacceptable. Environmental groups fought long and hard

---

<sup>77</sup> JAMES K. AGEE, *FIRE ECOLOGY OF PACIFIC NORTHWEST FORESTS* 13 (1993) (charting fire-return intervals for ponderosa pine forests in Oregon and Washington); see also Robert Steele et al., *Wildfire Patterns Change in Central Idaho's Ponderosa Pine-Douglas-fir Forest*, 1 WEST. J. APPLIED FORESTRY 16 (1986).

<sup>78</sup> NANCY LANGSTON, *FOREST DREAMS, FOREST NIGHTMARES: THE PARADOX OF OLD GROWTH IN THE INLAND WEST* 20-21 (William Cronon ed., 1995).

<sup>79</sup> *A Season of Fire*, EVERGREEN, Winter 1994-1995, at 48, 50 (discussing an overcrowded Idaho forest).

<sup>80</sup> FIRE IN AMERICA, *supra* note 69, at 17-18.



to eliminate timber harvesting from the natural forests. Timber harvesting is one of the most powerful symbols of human intrusion on nature and defacing "God's Creation." Environmentalists are therefore unwilling to see any timber harvesting on a large scale, even if it might serve a critical environmental purpose as well.<sup>81</sup>

Realistically, then, there may be no practical way to reach the national forest conditions of 1870. New burning in most cases will not work, and "mechanical thinning" (frequently followed by later burning) is "unnatural," and therefore theologically suspect. And so it seems that when it comes to the western national forests environmental religion reaches an impasse, unwilling to use the only means available to reach its desired end.<sup>82</sup>

There are other theological tensions as well. A wilderness, ideally, should be an area untouched by human hand—where the Creation can be seen in all its original glory. Of course, if people are to visit and encounter the Creation, some method is required to get them in and out of the wilderness area. Roads and motorized vehicles are prohibited in wilderness areas. Horses are allowed on trails, but the horses alter the trails and leave other clear signs of a human presence. Even if they simply walk on the trail, at some point the large number of people themselves will detract from the wilderness experience. Thus, a paradox arises in encouraging people to "go to church," and yet defining the very essence of that church as a place of minimal human presence.

A recent controversy over the use of permanent rock pitons by mountain climbers in wilderness areas illustrates this issue. Pitons are necessary to safely and successfully ascend many difficult climbing routes. Yet, some wilderness advocates argue that rock pitons represent an unacceptable "human hand" in the wilderness. Mountain climbers are becoming increasingly numerous with an ever greater impact on the wilderness environment.<sup>83</sup> Under pressure from environmentalists, the Forest Service is considering banning permanent rock pitons in wilderness areas. As expected, of course, rock climb-

---

<sup>81</sup> STEPHEN F. ARNO & STEPHEN ALLISON-BUNNELL, *FLAMES IN OUR FOREST: DISASTER OR RENEWAL?* 216 (2002) (illustrating environmental organizations' resistant stance to large scale timber harvesting).

<sup>82</sup> See Robert H. Nelson, *The Forest Fires Next Time*, *THE WKLY. STANDARD*, February 19, 2001, at 19 (discussing flaws in the Clinton administration's conservationist policies); Robert H. Nelson, *Environmentalism in Flames*, *LIBERTY*, December 2002, at 25 (repeating the proposition that environmentalists need to consider their policy decisions more carefully as their policies have arguably contributed to the raging forest fires).

<sup>83</sup> Robyn Morrison, *Invasion of the Rock Jocks: Have Rock Climbers Turned From Environmental Crusaders into an Environmental Menace?*, *HIGH COUNTRY NEWS*, July 7, 2003, at 10.

ers have strongly resisted this policy, and have found themselves embroiled in what is in essence a theological debate over whether the presence of rock pitons violates the "sanctity" of a wilderness area.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, passing the Wilderness Act of 1964 required substantial political compromise. As a result, hunting, livestock grazing, and even mineral development (until 1984) were allowed in wilderness areas, and wildfire suppression (often occurring in areas later designated as wilderness) significantly altered the vegetative composition of many wilderness areas. Thus, the idea of wilderness as a surviving remnant of "the Creation" is, again, largely a fiction. Indeed, it may very well be that there are no places left anywhere on earth that have not been significantly affected by human actions.

As a last comparison, it may be useful to note that many Christian creationists and traditional fundamentalists have chosen the biblical understanding of "Creation" over the scientific message of Darwinian evolution, even in the face of modern geological and biological findings over the past 150 years. Even as millions of tourists flocked to see it, radiocarbon dating suggested that the Shroud of Turin in Italy dated from the Middle Ages and not from the first century, as the Catholic Church had long maintained.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps wilderness areas should be so regarded; that is, perhaps they are places where it is more important that people can *believe* they are reading "the Book of Nature" than that they actually are. Wilderness areas, like biblical stories, may help to give them a sense of purpose and meaning in life, whatever the realities of the natural world may be. Environmentalists are unlikely to approve of this analogy. They, like those going to see the Shroud, want to visit a "true" place and not a figment of an active environmental imagination. At present, however, they, like many of their fundamentalist Christian counterparts, would seem to face an unpalatable choice: either give up on environmental religion, or reject the conclusions of modern science.<sup>86</sup>

### SINFUL HUMANITY

As I have been suggesting, environmental religion might be seen not only as Judeo-Christian in a general way, but more specifically as a modern and now secular offshoot of Calvinism. Following Martin

---

<sup>84</sup> A similar debate currently rages over the use of non-motorized mountain bikes in wilderness areas.

<sup>85</sup> Jim Barrett, *Science and the Shroud: Microbiology Meets Archeology in a Renewed Quest for Answers*, THE MISSION, Spring 1996, available at <http://www.uthscsa.edu/mission/spring96/shroud.htm>.

<sup>86</sup> See Robert H. Nelson, *Environmental Creationism*, FORBES, April 8, 1996, at 76 (criticizing Bruce Babbitt's use of environmental religion for political purposes).

Luther, the theology of John Calvin had a significant impact on the course of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>87</sup> Not coincidentally, environmentalism in Europe is most successful in traditionally Protestant countries like the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Germany, and England. Environmental influence, by contrast, is weaker in Catholic countries like France, Italy, Spain, and even Latin America. In the United States, the most important environmental leaders have typically come from Protestant family backgrounds.<sup>88</sup> Its Calvinistic elements are probably an important factor in explaining why environmentalism is attractive to so many Americans. Based on an ostensibly "scientific" body of thought, environmentalism has reasserted the Puritan heritage of this nation without the historical baggage of the institutional Christian Churches.

Christianity teaches that human beings have been afflicted by sin since mankind's Fall in the Garden of Eden. However, the Protestant Reformers saw the corrupting influence of the Fall as especially deep and powerful, and Calvinism carried this understanding of human corruption to the extreme. Many environmentalists today seem to agree.<sup>89</sup> As environmental historian, Donald Worster, has commented, "[t]he antidote for environmental destruction has been a movement called environmentalism and that movement has, in the United States, owed much of its program, temperament, and drive to the influence of Protestantism."<sup>90</sup> Environmentalist Dave Foreman, a founder of Earth First!, has described human beings as "the cancer of the earth,"<sup>91</sup> and Paul Watson, a founder of Greenpeace, called hu-

---

<sup>87</sup> See TIMOTHY GEORGE, *THEOLOGY OF THE REFORMERS* (1988).

<sup>88</sup> John Muir was brought up by a devout father in a frontier American Protestant faith, the Disciples of Christ (the "Cambellites"). See LINNIE MARSH WOLFE, *SON OF THE WILDERNESS: THE LIFE OF JOHN MUIR* 21 (1978). David Brower came from a devout Presbyterian and Baptist background in his youth, and read the Bible from cover to cover as a child. See DAVID BROWER, *FOR EARTH'S SAKE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DAVID BROWER* 19 (1990). While his family was not devout, Aldo Leopold came from a German Lutheran background. See CURT MEINE, *ALDO LEOPOLD: HIS LIFE AND WORK* 15 (1988). Dave Foreman was brought up in a devout family in the same Disciples of Christ denomination as Muir.

<sup>89</sup> Royal comments that John Muir

had escaped the harsh antinature Christianity of his Scots Calvinist father through remarkable experiences that led him to venerate the wild. But he brought to the new [environmental] religion the same prophetic fervor, antihuman bent, and moral absolutism that his ancestors had brought to the ancient faith. For him, what was human was corrupt, as only a Calvinist can construe corruption, and the human was corrupting nature.

ROYAL, *supra* note 10 at 12.

<sup>90</sup> DONALD WORSTER, *THE WEALTH OF NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION* 185 (1993).

<sup>91</sup> Douglas S. Looney, *Protector or Provocateur*, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, May 27, 1991 (interview with Dave Foreman).

manity the "the AIDS of the earth."<sup>92</sup> Of course, suggesting that the earth might be better off without any human beings at all goes well beyond even Calvin, who preached that God's plan included a human presence on earth, and that God would eventually intervene to save human beings (or at least many of them) from their state of radical depravity.

But there are other similarities. Calvinists were deeply skeptical of money and wealth.<sup>93</sup> A Calvinistic Puritan might be "called" to do well in business, but the accumulation of riches in itself was a dangerous temptation to sin. Such a view contrasts with progressive economic religion in which the very accumulation of more and more goods and services abolishes economic scarcity and makes possible the salvation of the world. Contemporary environmental religion, however, reverts to the old-fashioned Calvinist thinking about the morality of wealth and consumption. For many environmentalists, an excess of material outputs in the modern age is one of the major sins of our time. Less economic growth is needed, not more. Without slowing down our consumption of the earth's resources, further losses of plant and animal species and other grave sins against the environment are inevitable.

Today's environmentalism is filled with moralistic language and behavior seemingly modeled after the early Christian fathers. Wild areas are "raped," trees are "murdered," the ancient forests are a "cathedral" of nature, while "greedy" corporations "assault" the lakes and rivers, and Nature is "ravaged" by the "sinful" economic agents that violate her. In 1997, environmentalist Julia "Butterfly" Hill climbed 200 feet to the top branches of a redwood tree in northern California and stayed there for two years to protect the tree from timber harvesting and protest the commercial use of redwood forests. Similarly, in the Middle East, devout monks once climbed stone pillars where they remained for years at a time to demonstrate their complete devotion to God. In sum, environmentalism and the Christian tradition seem to share a moral and zealous character and set of practices.

#### CONCLUSION

There have been at least four great religious awakenings in American history that have greatly influenced the course of the nation.

---

<sup>92</sup> Captain Paul Watson, *On the Precedent of Natural Law*, 3 J. ENVTL. L. & LITIG. 79, 82 (1988).

<sup>93</sup> See WILLIAM J. BOUWSMA, *JOHN CALVIN: A SIXTEENTH CENTURY PORTRAIT* 195-96 (1988).

Even the most influential of those awakenings and their respective religions have not been internally and logically consistent in all of their arguments, and they have all had to make awkward compromises with prevailing scientific wisdom. No religion can be perfect.

But without religion's moral energy, without a certain fanatic devotion to a cause, there might be little movement in the American political system. So, we might applaud the rise of environmental religion as a sign of the great vitality of American religion today. After all, the political energies aroused by environmental religion have contributed significantly to improving air quality, reducing water pollution, protecting our forests, controlling toxic waste, and any number of other environmental gains over the past few decades.

There is, however, also a significant negative side to the power of environmental religion. There are a number of irrational aspects to environmental policy making in the United States,<sup>94</sup> with the environmental crusade often stirring strong reactions against the "evils" of economic and technological progress, and offering fantastic images of a mythological American "wilderness." Furthermore, environmental law and policy making has often been confused, reflecting a moral inspiration that asks government administrators to ignore calculations of costs and benefits when this is impossible in practice. Of course, society is simply not prepared to commit all its resources to any one public purpose, and so environmental laws often mainly serve a symbolic purpose that frustrates our attempt to create a consistent environmental policy. Influenced by the environmental movement, policy makers in the United States often choose more expensive ways of achieving environmental objectives, as if spending the money itself is a symbol of our concern for the environment.

I attribute many of our environmental policy failures to the teachings of environmental religion and the behavior of the "environmental churches." Some religions encourage martyrdom over the practicalities of real world compromise. American environmentalism has often chosen religious imagery over more concrete accomplishments, and ultimately the environmental policy confusions in the United States today reflect, in significant part, a theological confusion.

Perhaps the greatest source of such confusion involves the idea of "nature." The concept of nature is invoked in two very different senses.<sup>95</sup> One is the "nature" of God's original creation, as depicted in

---

<sup>94</sup> See PUBLIC POLICIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (Paul R. Portney & Robert N. Stavins eds., 2d ed. 2000) (discussing not just the problems in the policy making but some alternative solutions as well).

<sup>95</sup> This duality in thinking about nature is not new. John Stuart Mill more than a century ago observed that "nature" was being regarded in a much different way in the poetry of Words-

the Bible. Another is a nature in constant Darwinian struggle for survival among plant and animal species. In the Darwinian natural world, there is unremitting conflict; different species often kill one another; it is a cruel and heartless place on the whole. Environmental religion generally portrays a more romantic vision of nature, the nature of "the Creation," as a benchmark for public policy. That kind of nature is benevolent; it is the Garden of Eden restored on earth.<sup>96</sup> Yet, modern science tells us that the Darwinian vision of unremitting struggle for survival is the actual world of plants and animals.

Without a clear understanding of "nature," it is difficult to formulate sound policies for protecting the natural world. On the one hand, if we seek to "restore" nature, it is necessary to have an operational understanding of our environmental goal. On the other hand, if the "real" nature is Darwinian, and the natural world is a violent, species-against-species struggle for existence, it is not clear why we would want to restore nature at all.

Indeed, environmentalism spreads attitudes toward nature that are beyond the world's ordinary nature. One might say that environmental goals are not even "natural." No ordinary plant or animal shows a sense of deep care and responsibility for "all of Creation." Environmental religion, in fact, teaches us to be "unnatural," even as it professes to seek the "natural."

Environmentalism advocates "original nature," "the Creation," re-discovering the Garden of Eden, as its policy objective. Yet, this religious ethos is typically developed in the language of modern ecological science, including the biological understandings of Darwin and his followers. The frequent combination of these ideas within environmentalism, while theologically incoherent, has demonstrated a powerful emotional appeal to large segments of the American public. Cynically, I might wonder whether there may be almost a willful blindness within the environmental movement concerning these tensions.

---

word and other Romantics, as opposed to the nature studied by physical scientists. See JOHN STUART MILL, *Nature, in THREE ESSAYS ON RELIGION* (AMS Press 1970).

<sup>96</sup> As Mark Sagoff has observed, "ecology in large part has become the science of Eden." There is an underlying belief that "Nature has ecological integrity and design because it is directed by an independent Force"—that is to say, God. Mark Sagoff, *Ecosystem Design in Historical and Philosophical Context*, in *ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY: INTEGRATING ENVIRONMENT, CONSERVATION AND HEALTH* 74 (David Pimentel et al. eds., 2000). It has become the case today that "[i]t is our ecologists and philosophers who now impute overarching order, purpose, or design to the natural world." *Id.* at 75. That is to say, the science of ecology is best understood as a series of new metaphors by which an old fashioned environmental religion speaks to modern men and women who otherwise renounce such religion.

Most Americans no longer live in "nature." They receive their information from television, the newspapers, and other second hand sources which are often as concerned with reinforcing popular myth as with communicating scientific fact. Simply put, myth often sells better than valid scientific knowledge, and our various instruments of mass communication are, in the end, forms of private business. Environmental policy making thus often becomes a "Disneyland management" of nature and the environment. That is, it is management by the government for the purpose of creating appealing images for mass public consumption.<sup>97</sup> The idea that government is "restoring the Creation," and bringing back the Garden of Eden, makes Americans feel good, and appealing to the public imagination on these terms makes private fund-raising much easier.

Finally, the balance seems to have shifted within environmental religion over the last two decades toward the popular "wilderness" images and away from more practical concerns for improved public health and increased public recreation. There seems to be less commitment today to real world steps that would actually succeed in reducing cancer or curbing air and water pollution. Today's environmentalism lacks the moral idealism and energy of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The Washington offices of environmental organizations now resemble Washington law offices and corporate headquarters. To be sure, many religions, including Christianity, have at times combined elements of faith and business. In Sinclair Lewis's famous novel, Elmer Gantry is a southern preacher concerned mostly with making money from his preaching.<sup>98</sup> If the message brought in the dollars, not much else mattered. Despite its idealism and strong religious motivation, the environmental movement is in danger of going the way of Elmer Gantry. The world needs a strong environmentalism—but it should be an environmentalism that is clearer thinking, less dogmatic, and shows a greater commitment to scientific truth than to mythologies and dollars. Environmentalism in the twenty-first century will need a new and better theological foundation than contemporary environmentalists have been able to provide.

---

<sup>97</sup> See Robert H. Nelson, *Mythology Instead of Analysis: The Story of Public Forest Management*, in *FORESTLANDS: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE* (Robert T. Deacon & M. Bruce Johnson eds., 1985) (reiterating a critique of government's public relations maneuvers in the realm of environmental policy); Robert H. Nelson, *Government as Theatre: Towards a New Paradigm for the Public Lands*, 65 U. COLO. L. REV. 335 (1994) (proposing that policy makers shift their focus from media relations to practical solutions for ecological problems).

<sup>98</sup> SINCLAIR LEWIS, *ELMER GANTRY* (New American Library 1970) (1927).