Calvinism Without God:
American Environmentalism as Implicit Calvinism

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Abstract

Environmentalism has emerged as an important part of the American public debate since the 1960s. It challenges the longstanding implicit faith in economic progress as the path of salvation of the world. The exercise of human scientific and economic mastery is instead seen as frequently doing great damage to the natural world, including to the global climate and the endangerment of whole species of plants and animals. To a greater degree than most environmentalists realize, the real roots of their thinking lie in Christian (and Jewish) sources. One might describe environmentalism as an implicit Christianity—a religion in disguise. In the United States, reflecting the large historic influence of Puritanism on the intellectual and political life of the nation, American environmentalism is an implicit Calvinism. This has been a major contributing factor to its wide success and impact there. Assessing the future prospects for American environmentalism will require the development of a more complete understanding of its deeply religious essence.

Keywords

environmentalism, nature, religion, green commandments, Calvinism

There are strong grounds in Christianity for protecting the environment—for being “good stewards” of “God’s Creation” (Santmire 2000). The most influential forms of environmentalism in American public life, however, have not justified their teachings about the human place in nature in traditional Christian (or Jewish) terms. Rather, American environmentalism has been an implicit religion, including even some adherents who have declared bluntly that they are atheists (for explanation and history of the development of the concept of implicit religion, see Bailey 1990, 1997, 1998, 2009 and 2010). More frequently, however, American environmen-
Talists say that they are “spiritual,” even as they reject the specific term “religion” in characterizing their own beliefs. Although John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club in 1892 wrote explicitly and at great length about encountering the mind of God in nature (Wolfe 1979), the word “God” today is seldom included as part of the vocabulary of American environmentalism.

The rise of implicit environmental religion since the 1960s is part of a broadening pluralism occurring within American religion in recent decades. The latest survey results of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, released in October 2012, show a rapid increase in the percentage of Americans (from 15 percent in 2007 to 20 percent in 2012), who say they are not affiliated with any religion (Pew 2012). (Among younger American adults, those under 30, the ranks of the self-declared “religiously unaffiliated” rise still further, to around a third). The Pew Survey (10) found that, among all the religiously unaffiliated, fully 58 percent “say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth.” These unaffiliated “nones” thus reject any ties with the Methodist, Baptist, Catholic and or any other official historic church bodies but are now turning in rapidly growing numbers for instruction in religion to (newer religious) organizations such as the Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society (whose longtime motto, taken from Henry David Thoreau, was, “In wildness is the preservation of the world”). Indeed, environmentalism has become the leading religious outlet for those many Americans who are today seeking a deeper meaning in life, but nevertheless reject traditional religion as an option.

In cutting themselves off, however, from the historic explicit expressions of Christian religion, there is a price to be paid: implicit environmental religion in the United States is often theologically confused and naïve, ending up in theological conundrums, and even contradictions, that traditional Christian religious have long recognized and attempted to resolve (not always with full success). To some extent, admittedly, contemporary American environmentalism continues in the Protestant tradition of skepticism with respect to rational religious argument, and a conviction that true belief—now true environmental belief—is reached “by faith alone.” This poses a particularly large theological tension (if mostly unacknowledged) for those many American environmentalists who also simultaneously declare that their environmental beliefs are grounded in rational scientific argument, and represent an “objective” conclusion.
An Implicit Christianity

Writing in the journal *Implicit Religion*, the American environmentalist Leslie Van Gelder (2004, 210) wrote of her father that, “although he was not a man who spoke of his religious faith, I believe that his relationship to the wild was one filled with a deep sense of implicit religion.” The daughter followed the father but was now more explicit in expressing the fact that her own beliefs were religious—although still putting them in the end in the category, as she called it, of “implicit religion.” As she wrote, for people like herself:

A relationship with the wild offers a set of meaningful patterns by which to understand existence. In the wild, faith comes from the direct and often wordless connection to a greater than human force and the experience of the flow of the cycles of creation, change, and re-creation. Humans and human ways of being do not dominate this world-view, but are parts of a greater whole, subject to the same set of natural laws. The implicit nature of the wild offers an understanding of death which posits it in the picture of a continual system whereby the death of one feeds the life of another and the entire system, the life system of the world, grows richer through the interaction. The continuation of the life of the system is at the root of the implicit religious nature of the wild. (210–211)

This is a religious statement, by almost any definition of religion. As Van Gelder (210–211) writes, environmental religion provides a basis for us to understand our “existence” in the world; it is in the experiencing of the wild that we can gain access to a “faith” that will sustain our lives; the history of the world is one of “creation, change, and recreation”; in the wild we reach a “connection to a greater than human force”; recognizing that this force “transcends our own existence,” we come to know that “humans and human ways of being do not dominate this world-view but are parts of a greater whole”; through our environmental faith we can obtain “an understanding of death” which is part of “the life system of the world”; much greater than our own specifically narrow human concerns, “the continuation of the life of the system” is at the core of environmental religion.

If “*implicit religion*” is taken to mean that the religious character of a belief is denied, or remains unrecognized, Van Gelder obviously does not subscribe to an implicit religion in this sense. Indeed, the religious character of her beliefs, as further elaborated throughout her 2005 article, could not be more explicit. What still makes it an implicit religion, however, is the hidden meaning of much of Van Gelder’s language. She never uses words such as “God,” “salvation,” “resurrection,” “original sin,” “Eden,” “the arrival
of the millennium on earth,” and so forth, leaving aside such traditional religious language. However, for Christians, the Bible and their religion also explain the meaning of their “existence”; for Christians, their religion also ultimately comes from “faith”; for Christians, a central question to be resolved is also that of “creation, change, and recreation,” beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending in the Kingdom of God coming to earth; for Christians, their God is also a “greater than human force”; for Christians, the world belongs to God and human beings are also not to “dominate” it for their own ends; for Christians, a central mystery to be resolved is also the meaning of “death”; and finally, for Christians, their deaths and other aspects of human existence are to be understood as part of God’s grand plan for “the world.” Van Gelder’s message is thus Christian through and through, although she never acknowledges this explicitly—and in this respect she can be said to have been presenting an implicit religion.

It seems that historic Christianity today requires new implicit disguises in order to survive in anything like the numbers of the past. This has resulted in a large number of people today who are “Christians but who do not know it”—they are “implicit Christians,” if you will. Indeed, one might argue that since World War II the most widely influential individual writers in advancing a Christian ethics and worldview—seeing the world as a grand Christian battlefield of good versus evil, for example—have been J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis (Hammer 2005), and J. K. Rowling (Petre 2007).

Tolkien openly acknowledged that *The Lord of the Rings* and other fantasies of his were meant as implicit Christian parables. Lewis, one of the leading Christian apologists of the twentieth century for adults (when not writing children’s stories), was less forthright but no less motivated to advance an implicit Christian perspective. Thus one Lewis commentator notes that “God entered Narnia in the person of Aslan, a talking beast to rescue talking beasts, that he might redeem them and rescue them from the darkness of sin…. In the Narnia Tales,…the Lamp Post shines brightly on the person of Jesus Christ, the one who is the true light and Who comes into the world to enlighten all people!” (Hammer 2005)

It has been much the same for society as a whole, as people organize themselves into social movements that again offer implicit forms of Christianity that have attracted wide American (and other) followings. For large numbers of people in the twentieth century, they found their actual religion in ostensibly “secular” belief systems such as socialism, communism, and capitalism—and now environmentalism. Indeed, for many such people, deeply skeptical of anything officially labeled as “religion,” it may
well have been that historic Christian messages could only survive in such implicit forms. Marxism, for example, is now commonly recognized to have been a post-Enlightenment adaptation from Christianity (for the devout, today, a modern “Christian heresy”), in which human beings have fallen into sin and corruption (a state of “alienation,” now attributable to the class struggle), but will soon experience an apocalyptic moment in history, out of which will emerge a new heaven on earth—the Marxist millennial coming, as one might say. A leading theologian of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich (1967, 476) thus declared that, as a matter of objective historical influence (if not of the vaunted predictive scientific accuracy of his economic theories), Karl Marx was “the most successful of all theologians since the [Protestant] Reformation.” A prominent contemporary philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 6) wrote 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 [or was until recently] the historical successor of Christianity.”

An environmental fall in the garden

Van Gelder’s environmental message is no less Christian, than the Tales of Narnia was a disguised statement (in his case intentionally done), of the Christian beliefs of C.S. Lewis. Van Gelder, moreover, is far from an outlier within contemporary American environmental thinking. Indeed, her language may be vivid, and there may be particular nuances to her argument, but her basic message is representative of a wide body of American environmental thought and writings since the 1960s (drawing on earlier writings dating to the late nineteenth century, as well) (see Nelson 2010 Parts II and III). Other sections of her 2005 article (typical of other recent environmental writings), tell a story of an original and true natural harmony in the world (now the outcome, however difficult to reconcile, of un-guided Darwinian evolution), until this Eden-like condition was disrupted about 10,000 years ago by the rise of agriculture, soon followed by civilization. As environmentalist Wes Jackson (2003) of The Land Institute in Kansas explains, “agriculture had its beginning 10,000 years ago. What were the ecosystems like 10,000 years ago, after the retreat of the ice? Those ecosystems featured material recycling and they ran on contemporary sunlight. Humans have yet to build societies like that.” So we must now learn how to recover that original much happier state of the human relationship to nature of 10,000 years ago.
For implicit American environmental religion, the rise of agriculture thus was the (environmental) moment of “original sin,” resulting in a growing alienation of human beings from their culture and existence that continues to the present day. However, fortunately there are some wild parts of the earth remaining, where signs of any human impact are still minimally present. Because these wild areas have not yet been corrupted by agriculture or other human actions, for American environmentalists it is still possible to experience in them “the Creation,” thus gaining access to a mirror of the mind of God as he first expressed his thinking at the beginning. God is not literally present in wild nature (that would be pantheism), but encounters with such wilderness “cathedrals” are capable of communicating the deepest truths (“God’s truths”) of human existence. For some environmentalists and other people it can be transformative, changing their lives, allowing them to live a more spiritual existence in full devotion to a divinity newly revealed in nature. In the experiencing of the wild, seeking to move beyond the alienation that all too often characterizes normal human existence in the modern condition, they can, as one might say, be environmentally “born again.”

Such an implicit Christianity is a staple of American environmental literature and philosophy. As a leading commentator on environmental thinking, Bron Taylor (2001, 176), writes, the many non-traditional expressions of environmental “spirituality need not be seen as opposing [older] religious traditions.” Indeed, they can well be understood as a new way of communicating (in a new manner) “the inner truth” (176) that is at the heart of the older religious traditions, one that is more in tune with contemporary “unaffiliated” religious habits of thought. Thus, as Taylor (176) explains, the explicitly spiritual writings of environmentalism “can be viewed as an [implicit] quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religion.” Even with their outwardly maintained rejection of traditional religion, Taylor (178) comments, “many Americans express affinity for nature spirituality, and not only those involved with more outspoken groups such as Earth First!, the Sierra Club, or Friends of the Earth.” Indeed, the implicitly religious character of American environmentalism fits well within the much wider American trend of recent years toward “syncretistic, tolerant and ‘pastiche-style spirituality’…found among [individualistic] baby boomers” (178), thus significantly broadening its religious appeal.

Religious elements aside, it should also be noted that leaving the religious character of environmentalism to remain implicit also serves a very
practical political purpose in the American setting. If environmentalism were explicitly recognized in American public life as an actual religion, this would pose difficult issues for the American constitutional requirement for a separation of church and state (Nelson 2011). How is it possible, for example, to proselytize one religion, environmentalism, in public elementary and secondary schools, while legally banning any similar proselytizing of Christian and other traditional religions? Environmentalism at present, however, as an implicit (and thus typically unrecognized) form of religion, avoids this tension, thereby maintaining full access to the powers of the American state for advancing its own religious purposes. Public spokespersons for environmentalism in wider American political debates, thus normally deny its religious character, trying to avoid acknowledging any explicitly “religious” content of their admittedly “spiritual” beliefs. Indeed, rather disingenuously, the normal public posture of environmental activists in the halls of the U.S. Congress, and other U.S. official policy-making settings, is that the grounds for advancing environmental causes has nothing to do with any core religious values, but is a matter of applying “good science.”

There have admittedly been some exceptions. The Wilderness Act was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1964, establishing the legal basis for a national wilderness system that now covers about 5 percent of the land area of the United States. As the Act declares, “a wilderness…is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain,” thus allowing the area to retain “its primeval character and influence.” In protecting future “natural conditions” to keep the “imprint of man’s work [as] substantially unnoticeable,” this will allow visitors to escape from their ordinary mundane human activities and to have deep spiritual experiences, and observe directly the small and humble place of human beings in the universe.

Thus, forty years before Van Gelder published her statement of her own implicit Christianity in the pages of Implicit Religion, the U.S. Congress had legally endorsed—if in admittedly less eloquent and ostensibly more “secular” terms—much the same implicit environmental faith, as an official statement of U. S. government policy.

Explicit versus implicit environmental religion

Holmes Ralston is a distinguished American philosopher, who delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures in religion in Edinburgh in 1997–1998.
In 2006, he authored an article on “Caring for Nature: What Science and Economics Can't Teach Us but Religion Can.” Ralston is clearly on the environmental side of the “holy wars” between economic and environmental religion, writing (308–309) that “nothing in economics ensures against philosophical confusions, against rationalizing, against mistaking good for evil, against loving the wrong gods. The whole economic enterprise of the last four centuries could yet prove demonic, a Faustian bargain in the next millennium. As good an indication as any of that is our ecological crisis.”

Ralston knows more about religion than many American environmentalists. He also laments the “twentieth century trend toward privatizing religion,” and the turn away from traditional organized religions that are more capable of acting publicly at a collective level in society. Also, unlike many current environmentalists, he brings a generally favorable view of organized religion as such, including an explicit endorsement of a necessary role in environmentalism for “the brooding Spirit of God” (Ralston 2006, 313). Whether this must be a Christian God is not altogether clear, but Ralston clearly sees Christianity as having the resources to play a leading role in addressing the ecological crisis of our times. He thus writes (312) that “Jesus often drew his parables from nature—the mustard seed or the sower going out to sow, or God and the sparrows. In the Psalms and in Job, the wilderness reveals God’s majesty. Without these experiences, the land cannot fulfil all its promise.” Based in part on such biblical passages, Ralston (312) asserts that “Christianity, together with other faiths that influence human conduct,” have the ability “again to become ‘a land ethic’”—as Aldo Leopold (1949) once preached so eloquently, and as many other American environmentalists have since followed him.

Other than the explicitness of his appeals to traditional religion, however, Ralston delivers much the same message as Van Gelder and many others for whom the Christian elements of their environmental religion remain mainly implicit. As Ralston is in full agreement about the destructiveness of the human presence on earth, for example:

Managing the planet for our benefit is not the best paradigm; it is a half truth which, when taken for the whole, becomes dangerous and self-defeating. We ought rather to think of ourselves as residents who are learning the logic of our home community, or as moral overseers trying to optimize both the cultural and natural values on the planet.

Is our only relationship to nature one of engineering it for the better? Perhaps what is as much to be managed is this earth-eating, managerial mentality that has caused the environmental crisis in the first place.
the larger planetary scales it is better to build our cultures in intelligent
harmony with the way the world is already built, rather than take control
and rebuild this promising planet by ourselves and for ourselves.
(Ralston 2006, 312)

In the same issue of the journal *Environmental Values*, Princeton Uni-
versity professor (of English), Susan Stewart (2006), responded to the
Ralston article. For the most part, she agreed with Ralston (and with Van
Gelder and many other environmentalists), writing (317), for example,
that “environmental policies made only on the basis of present-centered
costs and benefits pose a failure of imagination as well as a failure of eth-
ics.” Our current habit of “valuing false needs as if they were vital to our
existence” works to “create an atmosphere of emergency that obscures the
ture unfolding disaster of our relationship to nature’s finitude” of the pres-
et day (316–317). In our current world, we need to learn better how to
address “the questions that most deeply inform the course of our lives—
‘What is human life and what is its extent?’ ‘What is the purpose of such
life; toward what ends do we strive and what actions should be valued?’
To what degree will we pursue pleasure and the postponement of death?”
(317). Our means of addressing such questions will “have an impact on all
future generations and it is the task of each generation to seek answers for
them, answers that will in turn affect later generations” (317).

Stewart, however, like so many believers in implicit environmental reli-
gion today, does not agree with Ralston that Christianity (or any other tra-
ditional religion) has a large role to play. As she writes (319), “there seems
to me to be no particular purchase that [organized] religion can provide
for environmental ethics, especially if such religion is other-worldly rather
than based in lived experiences of nature,” such as can be found in visiting
the wilderness. For Stewart (319), traditional “religion is more often than
not based on ritual sacrifices of many kinds, including sacrifice of animal
and even human life.” Indeed, “to call for ‘sacrifice in the interests of the
environment,’ as politicians today so often do, is artificially to pit our inter-
est against the interests of nature and future generations” (319). It reflects
a false current perpetuation of “an idea of scarcity that is blind to the enor-
mous waste of labor and resources that characterizes our modernity” (319).

Like so many of her generation, Stewart is thus determined to leave
behind traditional religion, instead basing her implicit environmental reli-
gion entirely in a deeper understanding of this world, as we live in it and
experience it. She seems oblivious to the large degree to which her own
fundamental way of thinking is shaped by the legacy of traditional religion,
and that she may in fact be a true believer in a contemporary “Christianity in disguise.” In this respect, she forgoes the possibility of drawing on Christian resources, accumulated over many centuries, that have sought to address similar religious questions.

**The intrinsic value of nature**

In 1973 the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess used the term “deep ecology” to explain that nature has an inherent value, and criticized anthropocentric, “shallow” environmental thinking, which falsely saw the value of wild nature in practical human terms. As Bron Taylor (2001, 179) writes, such language “rapidly gained acceptance among a variety of figures and movements that had been or would soon be advancing their own criticisms of anthropocentric environmental ethics.” Indeed, since the 1970s the idea that nature has an “intrinsic value” and that the protection of wild nature must transcend “anthropocentrism,” has been a main distinguishing feature of American environmental thought. This means not only that nature has a value outside any consideration of direct human benefits, but that the intrinsic value of nature does not depend at all on what humans do or think. If human beings did not exist on earth, that is to say, nature would still have an intrinsic value.

This is a radical departure from the way Marxism, socialism, capitalism and other “economic religions” have viewed nature. For such implicit religions, whatever their many other differences, agree in seeing human economic progress as the path to heaven on earth (Nelson 1991, 2001). Nature, lacking any transcendent purpose in and of itself, its purpose in the world is to serve the much greater value (itself an actual transcendent goal) of human progress, which is the true path of our salvation in this world. Thus, in the field of economics, nature is typically described as a “natural resource.” Economic analysis seeks to show how human beings should use natural resources, along with other available resources, to maximize the overall efficiency of the economic system, and thus to maximize the rate of human progress on earth. Indeed, this fundamental disagreement in their ways of thinking about the purpose and value of nature is one of the principle battlegrounds in “the new holy wars,” today being waged between implicit economic religion and implicit environmental religion (Nelson 2010a).

As with other aspects of American environmental religion, the central place of intrinsic value has large religious implications that most environmentalists have not fully recognized or perhaps even grasped at all. If the
true—the intrinsic—value of nature is said to lie outside any anthropocentric human concerns and actions, it follows that this intrinsic value must be derived from some non-human source. Something cannot have a “value”—for a value cannot exist in a vacuum—unless there is a valuer, human or otherwise. According to the explicit precepts of American environmental religion, however, the intrinsic value of nature cannot be derived from science, philosophy or theology, which are all necessarily anthropocentric. To believe in the existence of an intrinsic value of nature therefore must involve an element of faith in the existence of a non-human source—a source that almost by definition is not directly known to us. That is to say, the very concept of intrinsic value can only be understood in an explicitly religious way that includes the existence of important super-natural elements in the universe. (For an analysis of the difficulties of explaining “intrinsic” value in ordinary philosophical and other rational human terms, see Hill 2006). For most people historically, this has meant the existence of a “God” who values nature—“the Creation”—for its own sake.

Admittedly, the extra-human (the super-natural) source of intrinsic value need not necessarily be the traditional God of Jewish and Christian religion. The existence of such a God, however, is sufficient to provide an intelligible understanding of the meaning of intrinsic value. To speak of intrinsic value can thus be seen as an implicit environmental way of saying that God exists, that the world belongs to God, and that human beings must obey God’s commands for his Creation in all their thinking and actions on earth. It would be an implicit environmental rediscovery of the traditional language of Christianity, according to which “humans are assigned the responsibility of overseeing the welfare of all God’s other creations, including nature” (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, and Mahoney 2001, 389). The bible so instructs the faithful in Genesis 2:15, where we learn that God put human beings on the earth “to till it and keep it.” Thus, “the underlying [biblical] message is that the world belongs to God and, thus, is holy. Hence, it is right to respect the environment, and even sacrilegious not to do so” (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, and Mahoney 2001, 389). Once again, the most plausible way of understanding American environmental religion is that it is an implicit “Christianity in disguise.”

As long ago as 1961, the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade “posited that perceiving spaces (such as the environment) as sanctified provides people a nodal access to what is perceived as the ultimate transcendent reality” (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, and Mahoney 2001, 389). In a 1997 empirical exploration of this thesis, 45 local environmen-
tal activists in Austin, Texas were interviewed, the researchers concluding that in this instance the local environment did in fact serve for them as an implicit religious symbol of the sacred (Bartkowski and Swearingen 1997).

The Protestant ethic and the spirit of environmentalism

Max Weber (1958) famously wrote in the early twentieth century of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber started off by noting the remarkable historic range of connections, continuing into his own time, between economic success and the presence of Protestant religion. Although Weber’s thesis would later be much criticized, overall it has withstood the test of time. The preponderant view today is that, although the influence of Protestantism on economic outcomes depends on a wider set of factors than Weber focused on (including the Protestant encouragement of literacy, for example), his basic insight of a strong link between Protestantism and modern economic success was essentially correct (Nelson 2010b).

One might make a similar observation today with respect to environmentalism: that measures of environmentalist impact on society are closely correlated with the historical presence of Protestantism in a nation, region, or individual upbringing. The great majority of leading figures in the development of American environmentalism, for example, grew up in Protestant homes. Aldo Leopold came from a Lutheran background, but a remarkable number of American environmental leaders, including John Muir, Rachel Carson, David Brower, Edward Abbey, and Dave Foreman, were brought up in the Presbyterian church (the Scottish branch of Calvinism), or one or another of its American offshoots. In contrast to the leading role that Jews have played across many other areas of American intellectual life, a major Jewish presence is conspicuously absent in environmentalism. As environmental historian Mark Stoll (2001, 419) notes, “Jewish environmentalists have often bemoaned the apparent absence of prominent Jews in the environmental movement” in the United States (Robert Marshall, a founder of the Wilderness Society, being the most prominent exception).

In Christianity, nature historically is seen as God’s own Creation, according to a plan in his mind at the beginning. Until the nineteenth century, moreover, the world was generally considered to be only 6,000 years old, and little altered since then. As such, to visit nature in traditional Christianity is to be in the presence of the artwork of God, an experience capable of stirring the most powerful of religious feelings. Indeed, it was often said in Christian religion that there were “Two Books” which could directly
reveal the thinking of God: one, the divinely inspired Book of the Bible, and the other, the Book of Nature that had been little altered by human actions since God had made it at the Creation.

The study of nature was especially important for Protestantism because it rejected a third and Catholic main way of learning about God—the teachings of the Catholic Church itself, as they had developed over many centuries of religious study, debate, and interpretation within the Church. To this day, the experience of wild nature is less important in Roman Catholic theology, and Catholics have played a less significant role in the American environmental movement. Baird Callicott notes that “the wilderness idea,” based on going to wild nature to directly encounter God’s essential revealed truths at the Creation, “plays no significant role in the intellectual environmental history of Catholic Latin America, only in that of Protestant Anglo-America (and, revealingly, Protestant Anglo-Australia)” (Callicott 1998).

As the American historian Thomas Dunlap (2006, 327) writes, American environmentalists have often exhibited a religious dogmatism much like that of Protestant “fundamentalist Christians.” Mostly unconsciously, American environmentalism adopted “much of the radical individualism and personal salvation of Protestantism” (329). At the same time, however, environmentalists advocated a goal of a world of all people living together in full harmony with nature. As Dunlap (328) finds, this attempt to blend a fierce Protestant individualism with a search for social harmony has yielded “a movement with deep contradictions between principles and (often unconscious) practice.” It is part of the price paid by implicit religion in general, for not explicitly putting many core assumptions and beliefs up for closer scrutiny and analysis. If American environmentalism is to develop greater coherence in its thinking, Dunlap argues that it will require going beyond current implicit religion to study explicitly the historic ways “conventional religious traditions. …balanced the competing claims of individual and community in a wide variety of ways over the centuries”; all this, as part of a necessary process of more “consciously admitting and carefully examining environmentalism’s roots in secular faiths and conventional religion” (328–329). (See also Dunlap 2004.)

Finding similarly (that all the “Protestant” features of American environmentalism are more than a mere coincidence), the distinguished American environmental historian, Donald Worster (1994, 196), concludes that contemporary environmentalism is indeed the continuation of the nation’s Protestant heritage, in a new implicit form. Present-day American envi-
ronmentalism, for example, exhibits an attitude of profound “moral activ-
ism,” in this respect following the legacy of Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and
John Knox—all major figures in the history of the Protestant Reformation,
who were “energetic radicals hacking away at obstacles to social change”
(196). This intense desire to purge the world of its evils was combined in
early Protestantism with a strong sense of “ascetic discipline” (196). There
was, as Worster explains, “a deep suspicion in the Protestant mind of unre-
strained play, extravagant consumption, and self-indulgence, a suspicion
that tended to be very skeptical of human nature, to fear that humans were
born depraved and were in need of strict management” (196). Worster
now finds that the very echoes of this more pessimistic way of thinking are
often prominently featured among American environmentalists today, for
whom “too often for the public they sound like gloomy echoes of Gilbert
Burnet’s ringing jeremiad of 1679: ‘The whole Nation is corrupted...and
we may justly look for unheard of Calamities.’” Worster suggests that in
our own time, of a seemingly ever-expanding devotion to personal plea-

tures and consumption, “the Protestant ascetic tradition may someday sur-

vive only among the nation’s environmentalists, who...compulsively turn
off the lights” (195–196).

In the secular climate of the American public arena in the late twenti-
eth century, the essentially Protestant roots of the American environmen-
tal movement could be awkward (Nelson 1996). Because of the religious
diversity of the nation, and looking back to many past wars and other fierce
conflicts among competing branches of Christianity, Americans have long
been wary of debating religion in public. In the twentieth century, Amer-
icans thus frequently disguised their most important religious arguments
as conflicts among a pluralism of implicit religions, each invoking the name
and authority of Science, and typically without any explicit mention of
God. Worster (1994, 189) notes that even most of the “the histories of
environmentalism in the United States have so far been preoccupied with
politics and careers, with public ideas and debates. Nowhere near enough
attention has been given to the inward drives of reformers, to the elusive
and hidden patterns of temperament and motive, to the [implicit] shap-
ing forces of religion, family and class,” all of this typically derived, in the
American case, from Protestant sources.

An implicit Calvinism

Over the course of its history, the United States has been host to the full
range of Protestant religion, including many of the leading figures in the

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American Revolution such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who were products of the Anglican culture of Virginia (Fischer 1989). In terms of its intellectual life and moral activism, however, the leading Protestant influence on the nation has been Calvinism, first established by Puritan settlers from England arriving in Massachusetts in the mid-seventeenth century, who then soon spread their habits and ideas across much of the rest of New England. This Calvinist tradition was carried on in mid-eighteenth century Massachusetts by Jonathan Edwards—by many accounts, America’s greatest native-born theologian. It was then adapted to more implicit forms of Calvinism in the nineteenth century, by such leading New England transcendentalists as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, figures whose influence on American intellectual history would be large. The roots of contemporary American environmental thinking can be traced directly back through this Puritan Calvinist pathway.

The study of nature as a direct route (along with the Bible) to the mind of God—a reflection of His thinking at the Creation—has been a prominent feature of Calvinist religion. Calvin himself wrote in his great systematic statement of his theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that “the knowledge of God [is] sown in their minds out of the wonderful workmanship of nature” (Kerr 1989, 26–27). For those able to turn away from the “prodigious trifles” and “superfluous wealth” that occupy the minds of so many, he said, it will be possible to be “instructed by this bare and simple testimony which the [animal] creatures render splendidly to the glory of God” (99).

As Calvin further explained,

> The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God [cf. John 17:3]. Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men’s minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clean and so prominent … Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory.

(Kerr 1989, 24)

The objects of Jonathan Edwards’s most famous Calvinist writings in the mid-eighteenth century in Massachusetts were matters such as free will, the effects of original sin, and the proper interaction of church and society.
But he also preached the religious importance of the “Book of Nature.” In a virtual echo of Calvin’s *Institutes*, Edwards (1948, 69) wrote that, when “we look on these shadows of divine things” in nature, it is as if “the voice of God [is] teaching us these and those spiritual and divine things.” Encounters with nature “will tend to convey instruction to our minds, and to impress things on the mind and to affect the mind, that we may, as it were, have God speaking to us” (69). The Bible and nature are complementary routes to the thinking of God: to see first hand in Nature the Creation “will abundantly tend to confirm the Scriptures, for there is an excellent agreement between these things and the holy Scripture” (69).

After Edwards, Calvinism entered into a process of moving from an explicit religion to an implicit religion, in the person of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendentalists of the mid-nineteenth century. The great Harvard student of American Puritan history, Perry Miller (1964, 184), comments that, despite many differences in their thinking, “certain basic continuities persist in a culture” and this was no less true in New England from the mid eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century. Miller expected that “Jonathan Edwards would have abhorred from the bottom of his soul” much of what Emerson believed and wrote (185). An essential religious connection, however, “is persistent, from…Edwards to Emerson [which] is the Puritan’s effort to confront, face to face, the image of a blinding divinity in the physical universe, and to look upon that universe without the intermediacy of ritual, of ceremony, of the Mass and the confessional”—as Roman Catholics, for example, did (185). Emerson no less than Edwards reflected “the incessant drive of the Puritan to learn how, and how most ecstatically, he can hold any sort of communion with the environing wilderness” (185). One might thus, as Miller states, “define Emerson as an Edwards in whom the concept of original sin has evaporated” (185).

“Calvinism without original sin” admittedly would not be Calvinism—certainly not as Calvin understood it. But it might still be Christianity, depending on the definition. For many Christian devout, it would more likely be seen as a new form of Christian heresy, incorporating many religious truths in common, but also introducing some grave falsehoods. A third possibility would be to say that Emerson’s new implicit religion (and that of many others who would follow him in this respect) is a brand new religion altogether, even as it had emerged from Christianity (following, in this respect, the example of Islam in the seventh century).

In his thinking about nature, moreover, there was little religiously to differentiate Emerson from Edwards and Calvin. Indeed, adapted to the
language of the mid-nineteenth century, Emerson closely followed after them in writing that “the love of nature—the accord between man and the external world [is] but the perception how truly all our senses, and, beyond the senses, the soul, are tuned to the order of things in which we live…. I am thrilled with delight by the choral harmony of the whole. Design! It is all design. It is all beauty. It is all astonishment” (quoted in Ekirch 1963, 51). There was one great cosmic order of the universe—a reflection of the mind of God—to be found in heaven, in the natural world, and now within human beings themselves, available to be seen and experienced by those who knew merely how to look closely. As Emerson (1990, 32) explained in his hallmark 1836 essay “Nature”:

> If a Man would be alone, let him look at the stars. … One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime.

> The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression (17–18).

> There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, pre-exist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit. A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world (32).

With John Muir, a founding figure of the American environmental movement—the founder of the Sierra Club in 1892—the powerful influence of Calvinism now extended beyond New England. Muir’s boyhood home was in Wisconsin, where he grew up in an American branch of Calvinism; he then moved as an adult to California, where he would spend much of his life exploring the high Sierra mountains. Unlike present-day implicit environmental religion, Muir was entirely explicit about his religious purpose in going to the wilderness: that his central goal there was to learn about God by coming into the presence of his design. Muir (who regarded himself as a follower of Emerson) had rejected by then the traditional Calvinist faith of his youth, with its biblical literalism, but he still retained the Calvinist preoccupation with nature. The traditional Christian Bible having lost its authority for him, encounters with wild nature now became his remaining source of receiving direct knowledge about God. Muir (1979, 94–95) thus wrote that “no amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to know these mountains,” but a person encountering them directly would discover that “the pure in heart shall see God” (Wolfe
As he described the spiritual power of visiting the Yosemite region of California:

"The glacier-polish of rounded brows brighter than any mirror, like windows of a housing shining with light from the throne of God— to the very top a pure vision in terrestrial beauty. ... It is as if the lake, mount, trees had souls, formed one great soul, which had died and gone before the throne of God, the great First Soul, and by direct creative act of God had all earthly purity deepened, refined, brightness brightened, spirituality spiritualized, countenance, gestures made wholly Godful!

I spring to my feet crying: "Heavens and earth! Rock is not light, not heavy, not transparent, not opaque, but every pore gushes, glows like a thought with immortal life!" (Wolfe 1979, 83–84)

One might describe Muir’s environmental religion as in part explicit—explicit about the central place of God—and in part implicit—implicit about the deep Calvinist roots that underlay his own thinking about nature. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, American environmental religion was almost entirely implicit. For American environmentalists of this generation, the deep sense of spiritual inspiration in the presence of wild nature; the moral urgency to protect nature; the concern over human corruption, as manifested in the widespread destruction of God’s Creation; the emphasis on the humble place of human beings in a much larger universe; along with many other environmental beliefs, were still being drawn from the wellsprings of Calvinist religion. But now such Calvinist elements were almost entirely unconscious. Indeed, most American environmentalists since the 1960s would probably be shocked to hear that they were implicit Calvinists—and dismayed, if they were somehow persuaded of this truth.

**Green commandments**

American environmentalism is not only an implicit theology but also explicitly prescribes a wide range of “rituals” that have a Calvinist ascetic character. As Calvin himself said, a person must “indulge oneself as little as possible”: we must all discipline ourselves and “insist on cutting off all show of superfluous wealth, not to mention licentiousness” (Kerr 1989, 99). Today, in a similar fashion a good environmentalist should reduce use of energy; cut water consumption; recycle all waste; eat local organic food; plant only native species; walk or bicycle to work; renounce the wearing of fur coats; observe Earth Day as a new religious holiday; make pilgrimages to sacred wild sites; and obey many other environmental commandments.
The New York Times reported, for example, on the elaborate efforts being made by a Colorado couple to conform to the requirements of environmental living. As the Times reporter learned (Wadler 2010), “the renovated stairway is made from reclaimed barn wood. Their furniture is also made from recycled wood and steel; in fact, the coffee table is wood that was reclaimed twice, having been salvaged from reclaimed wood that was being made into flooring.” A “righteous” green lifestyle should also include appropriate food and other household products:

The couple—both in their thirties—also, use natural cleaning products, and are “constantly” drinking out of their Brita pitcher, so there is no need for disposable water bottles. All their personal-care products are organic, and Mr. Dorfman’s clothes are made from organic cotton and recycled materials—including his Nau blazer, which, he said, is made from recycled soda bottles.

The heights of religious perfection, however, often defy the best efforts of flawed human beings. This was true of the Colorado couple, who confessed that they sinfully “have one great greenie flaw: they are addicted to disposable diapers.” They regretfully acknowledged their weakness, that they know that they are “really environmentally sinful. It’s plastic derived from petroleum. You use them once and then they get tossed in a landfill. It’s a terribly inefficient use of natural resources.” But they could not seem to overcome the diaper temptation; as one of the Colorado couple lamented, “Not only do I feel guilt, I feel hypocritical” (Wadler 2010).

Another reporter for the New York Times (Kingson 2011) found that the desire to live an environmentally ethical life was driving some of the environmental faithful to hire professional help, paid “consultants [who] provide professional advice in ‘green living,’” A main purpose, the Times reported, is to “assuage the guilt of those who worry that they are letting the planet down”—“the planet” (or “earth” in other invocations) now having become the implicit environmental term for “God.” One environmental consultant advised a client to avoid driving, by using “a hair stylist within walking distance who would color her hair with nature dyes.” Another consultant advised a client to redecorate “her apartment with nontoxic paint, replace her vinyl shower curtain with linen and switch to more expensive recycled paper for her printer.” Consultants were also expected to do what they preached; as yet another consultant said of herself, “she was pretty ‘hard core’ about minimizing her own carbon footprint and was constantly researching the best ways to go about it.” One option was to buy carbon credits in carbon markets from people who were more sharply lowering their own carbon footprint in her place: a modern carbon
form of the medieval sale of “indulgences” by the Catholic Church.

The many such examples illustrate the Calvinist side to much of contemporary American environmentalism, as noted above (Worster 1994). The continual accumulation of goods and services is seen, not as the path to a greater individual and social happiness—and in the end to the transcendent goal of “progress”—but as a distraction from higher and better things, or even worse (Nelson 1993).

A 1970s Sierra Club Book advocates *Muddling Towards Frugality* (Johnson 1978). Scientific and economic optimism in the eighteenth century displaced the Calvinist pessimism that had long seen human beings living in a state of sinfulness, many of them predestined by God for damnation in the hereafter. Looking back on the human savagery of so much of twentieth century history, it suggested that perhaps a larger dose of old fashioned Calvinist pessimism was newly warranted. The implicit Calvinism of American environmentalism emerged in part to meet this need.

**Environmental calamities on a biblical scale**

Other parts of environmental religion implicitly draw heavily on key stories of the Old Testament. The Old Testament God has high requirements for his followers and often imposes severe punishments on those who defy his laws. Among the most important commands, as Deuteronomy (28:14) says, is that “You Must Never Worship Other Gods.” If you disobey, you will be “destroyed because of the sin of forsaking Him” (28:20). God “will send disease among you,…fever, infections, plague and war. He will blight your crops. All these devastations shall pursue you until you perish” (28:22). Throughout the Old Testament, God punishes wayward sinners with terrible environmental calamities, such as the great flood which required Noah to save the plants and animals of the earth on his Ark.

Enamored of their vast new powers over nature, resulting from the astonishing advances of the physical sciences, however, many modern human beings may be said to have abandoned their faith in the God of old. Instead (it may be said), they propose to substitute human beings themselves as a new god, the new all-powerful designers and controllers of nature for human benefit, applying technological knowledge gained since the nineteenth century onwards. That is to say (in this view), modern human beings have embarked on a project of “playing God” themselves. But in the Bible this is certain to make the God above angry, and severe punishments will surely soon be forthcoming. And, as in the Old Testament scheme, these punishments are very likely to take the form of a great flood, drought, pes-
tilence, earthquake or other natural environmental calamity.

Here again, American environmental religion, even when there is no explicit mention of the Bible, implicitly follows closely after the original. Former Vice-President Al Gore (2010) wrote in a *New York Times* op ed that unless we change our sinful ways, we “face an unimaginable calamity requiring large-scale, preventive measures to protect human civilization as we know it.” Perhaps the worst act of playing God, the most sinful of all current human activities, is the pouring of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, thus altering the climate of the entire earth, eliminating even the possibility of any genuinely wild areas remaining little touched by human hand.

As a result, American environmentalism prophesies that terrible new environmental catastrophes will soon be afflicting the earth. As Gore (2010) writes, the “seas are rising. Hurricanes are predicted to grow stronger and more destructive. … Droughts are getting longer and deeper… the severity of flooding increases. The seasonal predictability of rainfall and temperatures is being disrupted, posing serious threats to agriculture. The rate of species extinction is accelerating to dangerous levels.” While presented as a modern scientific statement, the implicit message is little changed from biblical times, as found in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and other parts of the Old Testament. Few American environmentalists recognize how close their implicit religion is to the original explicit biblical version—in a “secular” age, this is, indeed, a key part of the attraction of environmental religion.

Thus, as a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* commented (Rodriguez 2007), a Calvinist sense of the pervasive spread of human sinfulness was demanding reforms throughout American life, frequently expressed as a necessity to impose a powerful moral discipline in order to restrain the continuing sinful emission of greenhouse gases.

Such thinking had extended to parts of Britain as well, another nation significantly shaped by the legacy of (Puritan) Calvinism:

Because global warming and the efforts to halt it touch on nearly every realm of policy, the environment has become a moral prism through which all other issues are being filtered. Regardless of whether they actually care about the environment, partisans of all stripes are using the issue to gain the moral edge.

A green think tank in London has urged British couples to think of the environmental consequences of having more than two children. It released a paper showing that if couples had two children instead of three,
“they could cut their family’s carbon dioxide output the equivalent of 620 return flights a year between London and New York.” Similarly, last month a London tabloid featured a 35-year-old environmentalist who asked to be sterilized so she could contribute to the effort “to protect the planet.” “Having children is selfish,” she insisted. “It’s all about maintaining your genetic line at the expense of the planet.” Environmental rhetoric…constantly reminds us of our own culpability. For that reason, environmentalism is more akin to a religious awakening than to a political ideology. Like evangelicals, environmentalists speak, in their way, of fire and brimstone. Like the preacher, the environmental activist demands that we give ourselves to something beyond ourselves and that we do penance for our wasteful, carbon-profligate sins.

And like any religion that emphasizes sin, devotees will find all sorts of ways to prove their personal righteousness (Rodriguez 2007).

**Conclusion**

American environmental religion can well be seen, not only as a new extension of Jewish and Christian religion but, more specifically, as an implicit religious offshoot of Protestantism, and especially Calvinism. Indeed, the Calvinist elements go far to explain the attraction of environmentalism for so many Americans. Based on an ostensibly “scientific” body of ecological and other thought, environmentalism has reasserted the powerful Puritan heritage of the nation, in a form free of the historical baggage of the organized Christian churches. As traditional Calvinism waned, many of its main religious convictions proved more resilient in American life. But the new environmental Calvinists were determined to distance themselves from the old battles among competing church denominations, the petty squabbles, the biblical literalism, and the many other historic features of institutional Christian religion that had worked to limit its influence. They found a means to do so in the new implicit religion of American environmentalism. As one American Roman Catholic political commentator complained recently, “the new elite *class* of America is the old one: America’s…Protestant Christians in both the glory and the annoyingness of their moral confidence and spiritual certainty. They just stripped out the Christianity along the way” (Bottum 2014).

Many of the most important religious debates of the twentieth century were thus driven underground. The *Economist* (2002, 74) observes that “academic disciplines are often separated by gulfs of mutual incomprehension, but the deepest and widest may be the one that separates most economists from most environmentalists.” In the name-calling and other
nasty disputes that often break out between economists and environmentalists, “what underlies rows like this, as well as the more insidious refusal even to engage with the other side, is not so much disagreements about facts as disagreement about how to think” about the place of human beings in nature—a subject also at the center of Jewish and Christian religion for now almost 3,000 years. If there is to be any prospect of a new “ecumenical movement” among economists and environmentalists, it will require that both parties develop a deeper and more explicit understanding of their own powerful religious predispositions.

References


