CHAPTER 18

ECONOMIC RELIGION
AND ENVIRONMENTAL RELIGION

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Over the course of the twentieth century, historians increasingly recognized that modern systems of secular thought were not as novel as they had once seemed (Lowith 1957). The core beliefs of the Enlightenment included large elements of Christianity, if now partially disguised. Marxism in retrospect drew heavily on Christian religion, involving an original happy harmony with nature (a new Garden of Eden), a moment of the fall (the beginning of economic surplus and the class struggle), a resulting corrupted condition of human existence (a state of human alienation), an all-controlling set of economic laws (an omnipotent god), a cataclysmic clash between the capitalist and working classes (an apocalypse), and the arrival at a communist paradise (a new heaven on earth).

Marxism was only one of many "economic religions" of the modern age, including the beliefs of the economic mainstream of the second half of the twentieth century (Nelson 2001). While they often had much different economic prescriptions, all economic religions shared the conviction that economic progress—however it might best be achieved—would save the world. The foundational premise was that external factors in the environment shape the individual, these factors are predominantly economic, and thus by perfecting economic outcomes it will be possible to perfect the individual and society as well. Economic religions provided the theological justification—and thus the religious legitimacy—for the rise of the modern welfare and regulatory state.

In the last several decades of the twentieth century, however, economic religion was increasingly challenged by a new secular faith, "environmental religion" (Dunlap 2004). Indeed, the clash between these two forms of secular religion might be described as "the new holy wars," the most important religious controversy in the public arena of recent times, the results doing much to shape environmental and natural resource policies around the world (Nelson 2010b). Large numbers of people who in earlier times would have dedicated their energies to the economic progress of the world now turned instead
to protecting nature from what they saw as the damaging—indeed immoral—consequences of the headlong pursuit of economic growth and development.

As Max Weber forcefully argued, Protestantism and especially Calvinism contributed significantly to the rise of capitalism and modern economic growth. While there has been much debate, on the whole, the Weber thesis holds up well one hundred years later (see Nelson 2010a—and Stackhouse’s chapter in this volume). It was not, however, because Calvin or his followers intended this result. Indeed, they would have been shocked and appalled if they could have ever known that Calvinist religion would be a key contributing factor in the creation of modern capitalist society. Instead of obeying God’s commands, modern men and women increasingly pursued their own pleasures and selfish interests. Instead of worshipping God, they increasingly worshipped scientific and economic progress.

The historical successors to the Calvinist religions of old today bear little relationship to the original versions of Calvinism four hundred years ago. Congregationalism in the seventeenth century was the official church of Puritan Massachusetts, but the present-day Congregational Church in the United States (now part of the United Church of Christ) is simply another mainstream liberal religion that rejects much—probably most—of what Calvin taught. This does not mean, however, that Calvinism has disappeared altogether. Ironically, it has reappeared in a new disguised form, contemporary environmentalism. For environmental religion, as it would have been for Calvin, the modern worship of rapid economic growth is a false religion, resulting in the wanton destruction of much of God’s good creation. Depraved human beings, as Calvin also saw the human condition, have spread their sinful behavior across the earth. Indeed, they threaten to become a new “cancer of the earth,” as some leading environmentalists have in fact labeled the explosive population growth and other pervasive modern impacts on the natural world.

Those who worship false gods, as the Bible tells us, will incur the wrath and the severe punishment of God. In the Old Testament the punishment usually takes the form of a great flood, famine, disease, pestilence, earthquake, or other natural calamity. It is no coincidence that contemporary environmentalism foresees virtually the same environmental disasters. Environmental forebodings of doom today represent a secularization of the terrible justice of God as found in the Old Testament. Much of the great attraction of environmentalism has been the ostensibly scientific character of such beliefs, even as they have actually restored key elements of the Calvinism of old to the contemporary public stage. As did the original version, the environmental Calvinism of today again condemns the excesses of human pride and the pervasive substitution of human purposes and methods in place of the true God.

For economic religion, the world of nature is seen as a “natural resource.” Nature is to be put to good use by human beings as an instrument of economic progress. The progressive management philosophy for the public lands in the United States, for example, was long known as “multiple use” management (Nelson 1995). In environmental religion, by contrast, nature is seen as having “intrinsic value.” Human beings have a fundamental ethical obligation to protect and preserve nature that transcends any economic or other such “anthropocentric” concerns. Again, the implicit message is that nature is God’s creation and that human beings must respect God’s wishes—and not simply
follow their own selfish economic motives—in the use and treatment of nature. There is no greater sin than for human beings to seek to “play God” with the world, as they have increasingly done for the past three hundred years.

I. ENVIRONMENTALISM AND PROTESTANTISM

Many environmentalists today do not believe in a Christian God and do not know a great deal about Christian theology. Thus, they will probably be surprised to hear that the goal of “nature untouched by human hand,” as commonly described in contemporary environmental writings, is a secularization of “the Creation” as related in the Bible in Genesis. For Christians, there is, moreover, a reason why it is so essential to protect and preserve nature in its original unaltered state. God at the Creation made the world according to a design of His own. Thus, the natural order of the world, insofar as it is unchanged by human actions, can serve as a conduit to the thinking of God. God is not literally in nature which would be the heresy of pantheism. But unaltered nature is, as it were, a mirror or reflection of the mind of God.

In Christian theology, there are only two such avenues of direct access to the mind of God. One is the Book of the Scriptures and the other is the Book of Nature. The importance of reading the Book of Nature is found throughout Christian theology but is especially emphasized in Protestant religion—which emphasizes the necessity of learning about God only by direct forms of divine communication. In the Roman Catholic Church, another main way of learning about God is from the authoritative teachings of the Church itself, as they have been developed and refined over many centuries through its own internal workings. The Pope is inspired by God and the wider religious message of the Catholic Church similarly reflects a divine assistance and guidance. Since this potentially large body of authoritative church knowledge about God is ruled out in Protestantism (as a “human” creation in itself and thus not a direct communication from God), the Scriptures and the Book of Nature are left as the sole direct sources of divine truth.

As this chapter will show, the roots of contemporary environmentalism lie in Protestant sources and above all in Calvinism (see also Nelson 1993, 1997). I am not suggesting that environmentalists today look literally to Christian history and theology for the development of their own thinking. Indeed, most of them are unaware of the close connections between Christian religion and environmental religion. Believing that they have rejected Christianity, many environmentalists might even be distressed to discover that they have transferred their religious allegiance to a new—if secular—expression of much the same old Christian faith. Many environmentalists today might be described as unknowing believers in an “implicit Christianity.”

The importance of the Protestant roots is reflected in many aspects of environmentalism, including the religious backgrounds of leading environmentalists themselves. The
American historian of environmentalism, Mark Stoll, comments that “natural theology lay much of the groundwork for European natural science in general and ecology in particular, and justified and encouraged the study of nature as a religious activity” (Stoll 2006: 57; see also Stoll 1997). It was, moreover, a process dominated by ecologists with Protestant—and in the United States, mostly Calvinist—backgrounds:

Virtually all founding ecologists, the theorists of the communities of nature, had Protestant backgrounds. Prior to the Second World War, American and European Protestants very nearly monopolized ecological theory: first German and Scandinavian Lutherans, then Swiss Reformed, English Anglicans, and American Protestants. American Protestants from only certain denominations participated in developing this new science: ecology as a science crystallized mainly out of the Calvinist Puritan tradition that planted Congregationalism and Presbyterianism in America. Within the general attitudes toward and doctrines of these and their daughter churches, and not within the much larger Catholic, Methodist, and Southern Baptist denominations, lay the taproot of modern American ecological science. (Stoll 2006: 54)

It was not only the field of ecology that had strong Calvinist ties; environmental philosophers Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (1998: 5) comment that “many of the most notable and most passionate...defenders of the wilderness faith have a direct connection to Calvinism.” The Calvinist roots of American environmentalism go well beyond certain cultural or behavioral similarities—a common distain for luxury consumption or a shared drive to save the world, for example. From the beginning, nature occupied a central place in Calvinist theology and there were powerful Christian reasons to visit and experience nature.

After Martin Luther, John Calvin was the most important of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers. Calvinism carried the criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church and the way of thinking of the Reformation to their fullest logical consistency, making fewer compromises as compared with Luther. Max Weber (1958) showed the large historical role of Calvinism in bringing about the rise of capitalism but a much less appreciated role is the large contribution of Calvinism to the rise of the contemporary environmental movement. If Weber could speak of “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” one might now speak of “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Environmentalism.”

II. READING THE BOOK OF NATURE

Calvin 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.” For those able to turn away from the “prodigious trifles” and “superfluous wealth” that occupy the minds of so many, it will be possible to be “instructed by
this bare and simple testimony which the [animal] creatures render splendidly to the glory of God? Human beings must show respect for the natural world because it is especially in its presence that they can find "burning lamps" that "shine for us...the glory of its Author" above (Kerr 1989: 26–27, 99). As Calvin believed, God had created the world a mere few thousand years ago, and it was still possible to see in nature His handiwork, altered only in minor ways since the Creation.

Indeed, as noted above, there were considered to be two great books of authoritative religious truth, the Book of the Bible and the Book of Nature. Both must command the attention of the faithful; with the aid of each, as Calvin wrote, “let us study to love and serve him with all our heart” (Kerr 1989: 43). If only people will make the effort, they will be inspired and uplifted in contemplating all of God’s creatures and other parts of the Creation here on earth. As Calvin wrote,

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.

[Thus], there are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them.... Ignorance of them prevents no one from seeing more than enough of God’s workmanship in his creation to lead him to break forth in admiration... It is, according, clear that there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom. (Kerr 1989: 24)

Yet, human sinfulness often limits the ability of the faithful to see the many wonderful opportunities presented in nature to learn from God’s workmanship. As Calvin wrote, “although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest tendencies and they flow away without profiting us.” Even when it is possible to “grasp a conception of some sort of divinity” in contemplating the Creation, yet “straightway we fall back into the raving or evil imaginings of our flesh, and corrupt by our vanity the pure truth of God.” Weakened by our fallen natures, “we forsake the one true God for prodigious trifles.” This often happens not only to “the common folk and dull-witted men, but also the most excellent and those otherwise endowed with keen discernment, [who] are infected with this disease.” There is still hope, however, that we can witness “the invisible divinity [that] is made manifest in such spectacles”
in nature because we may find "the eyes to see" when our efforts are "illumined by the inner revelation of God through faith" (Kerr 1989: 24–26).

This is all part of the wider circumstance, as Calvin taught, that "our nature, wicked and deformed, is always opposing his [God's] uprightness; and our capacity, weak and feeble to do good, lies far from his perfection." Indeed, it is partly man's misplaced "pride" in his knowledge, skills, and power—in the modern age becoming a supreme confidence in human scientific and economic capabilities exceeding anything that Calvin might have imagined—that is "the beginning of all evils." Calvin warned that, if humanity did not turn away from its evil ways, such as the excessive worldly pursuit of economic goods for their own sake, God's plan for sinners was "wrath, judgment and terror"; their future he "would devote to destruction" (Kerr 1989: 56, 65, 99–100, 115). The form of God's punishment would often be a natural calamity—a great flood, a drought, a famine, or some other disaster—as foretold in the Bible to be the fate of the many sinners of the world. Environmentalism today foresees much the same divine retributions for modern men and women who now seek in the name of economic progress to play God themselves with the world.

In order to avoid such a fate, and as present-day environmentalism also instructs us, Calvin said that a person must "indulge oneself as little as possible" and we must all discipline ourselves and "insist on cutting off all show of superfluous wealth, not to mention licentiousness." Calvin does not, of course, speak of any requirements for "biodiversity," but he does instruct his followers that God has "wonderfully adorned heaven and earth with as unlimited abundance, variety, and beauty of all things as could possibly be.... [They are] the most exquisite and at the same time most abundant furnishings" imaginable. Human beings are told to "follow the universal rule, not to pass over in ungrateful thoughtlessness or forgetfulness those conspicuous powers which God shows forth in his creatures" of the natural world. Given their importance in the divine plan, Calvin also specifies that God intends "for the preservation of each species until the Last Day" (Kerr 1989: 99, 41–42). It would seem that not only Noah but all the Calvinist faithful have a religious obligation to protect the threatened and endangered species of the world—and this divine command should not be subject first to an economic test.

The Protestant Reformation banished many of the religious accoutrements of the Roman Catholic Church. There were to be no great cathedrals such as Notre Dame or Chartres; no future Michelangelo or Leonardo should adorn the walls of a bare and simple Calvinist church. The Book of Nature thus was all the more important because it offered a less harsh and more aesthetically pleasing element within an otherwise austere Protestant faith, and which was among the most severe of all in the teachings of Calvin.

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 rise of the environmental movement. Callicott, for example, notes that "the wilderness idea," based on going to wild nature to directly encounter God's essential 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: 389). Unlike most other areas of American intellectual life, Jews have also played
a limited role in the development of environmental thought—especially those aspects relating to the search for God by reading the Book of Nature, as in a wilderness area. (One exception is Robert Marshall, a founder of the Wilderness Society, and among the few Jews involved in the early development of American environmentalism.)

III. CALVINISTS IN THE MASSACHUSETTS WILDERNESS

Calvinism moved to England's American colonies when groups of Puritans (the English branch of Calvinism) began moving to Massachusetts in the early seventeenth century, often to escape religious persecution. A first order of business for the Massachusetts Puritans was to build their towns and villages. This would mean that forests would have to be cleared, animals killed for food, and fields made ready for farming—nature, in short, would have to be put to use for human purposes. These tasks were undertaken with the usual great energy and firm discipline of the Calvinist faithful. Nature in this respect might be instructive about God, but it was also something which first had to be overcome and then put to good use in the new world (Nash 1973).

Jesus had fasted for forty days and nights in the wilderness, fighting off the temptations of the devil, before learning of God's great plans for him. Similarly, if the Puritans could survive their initial hardships in Massachusetts, as Catharine Albanese (1990: 37) explains, the "wilderness was still a place of testing, the backdrop for a spiritual purification in which the corruption of old England might be permanently purged. As a proving ground for the saints, the wilderness might also protect them from worldly evil and even invigorate them. Indeed, it might become God's chosen place for conferring religious insight." Echoes of such thinking are still heard to this day in another side of the American experience of wild nature—as a place that challenges a person's physical strengths and capabilities and thus reveals and forges his or her special character.

The Massachusetts Puritans were well aware of, and were inevitably influenced significantly by, theological developments among their brethren in England for whom the natural setting was more conventional. In England a leading Puritan theologian, John Preston, explained in 1633—sounding much like Calvin a century earlier—that "the heavens are the worke of his [God's] hands, and they declare it, and every man understands their language" and "when a man lookes on the great volume of the world, there those things which God will have known, are written in capital letters" (quoted in Miller 1956: 77). In Massachusetts, Thomas Hooker expressed a similar view: "There are some things of God that are revealed in the creation of the world....A man looketh into the fabric of the world, and seeth the making of the earth, and the Sea, and all things therein, hee cannot say but God hath beene here, and infinite wisdom, and an almighty power hath been here" (quoted in Holifield 2003: 33). Characterizing the writings of a prominent Puritan theologian of the time, Brooks Holifield (2003: 33) states that they
"recited the familiar arguments for God's existence—design and order and the need for a sufficient cause to account for the world—and he thought that the 'workmanship' of the creation should prove to any rational person the reality of a God worthy of worship." As Perry Miller (1956: 77), the great Harvard historian of American Puritanism, wrote, 'quite apart from faith, therefore, there are two important sources of truth to which man has immediate access: himself and his experience of the world. Hence secular knowledge—science, history, eloquence, wisdom (purely natural wisdom)—is doubly important for these Puritans; for knowledge is not only useful, it is a part of theology.'

By the early eighteenth century, surviving the wilds of Massachusetts was no longer a main issue. Indeed, the colony was increasing in population, wealth, and otherwise was more and more prosperous. Indeed, many feared that the new economic growth posed an increasing challenge to traditional Puritan piety. With more time to contemplate the larger questions of religion, Cotton Mather authored two major works of theology, the first book about the Christian revelations of the Bible, and the second about the Christian revelations to be found in Nature. Mather (one of whose descendants, Stephen Mather, became the first director in 1916 of the US National Park Service) informed his readers that nature was a "Publick Library" into which they should "walk with me into it, and see what we shall find so legible there"; it will be a "Temple of GOD, built and fitted by that Almighty Architect." He found in a simple plant seed a wonderful set of qualities—evidence of God's marvelous workmanship—in that this "small Particle no bigger than a Sand" could contain all the information to produce a full "Plant, and all belonging to it," which exhibited an "astonishing Elegancy." Observing the physical properties of magnetism, Mather thought them also wondrous and that this "leads us to GOD, and brings us very near to him" (quoted in Albanese 1990: 41).

IV. THE GOD OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards is, by many accounts, America's greatest theologian who sought to address the growing religious skepticism of the eighteenth century and the substitution by many of a new faith in science and economics for the old faith in God. Although he was well aware of the latest scientific developments and addressed them in his writings, Edwards stoutly defended traditional Calvinist understandings and conclusions. He represented the American bridge between the traditional Calvinist thinking of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the New England transcendentalism of the nineteenth century.

The objects of Edward's most famous writings were matters such as free will, the effects of original sin, and the proper interaction of church and society. But he did sometimes preach about issues relating to the natural world and in his early years devoted much thought to theological questions being raised by Newton's discoveries and other increased knowledge of the scientific workings of nature. Partly owing to the transcription and publication in the twentieth century of Edward's private journals and other
writings, it is now possible to study more closely his early thinking on such matters. In a virtual echo of Calvin's Institutes, Edwards 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." The Bible and nature are complementary as the two main avenues of God's instruction: to see in nature the Creation firsthand "will abundantly tend to confirm the Scriptures, for there is an excellent agreement between these things and the holy Scripture" (Edwards 1948: 69). As Edwards summed up his thinking about the central religious importance of nature (in contemporary language, of the "environment"):

It is very fit and becoming of God who is infinitely wise, so to order things that there should be a voice of His in His works, instructing those that behold him and painting forth and shewing divine mysteries and things more immediately appertaining to Himself and His spiritual kingdom. The works of God are but a kind of voice or language of God to instruct intelligent human beings in things pertaining to Himself. And why should we not think that he would teach and instruct by His works in this way as well as in others, viz., by representing divine things by His works and so painting them forth, especially since we know that God hath so much delighted in this way of instruction. (Edwards 1948: 61)

In his leading biography of Edwards, George Marsden thus explains that, while Edwards's theology of nature involved some changes in emphasis and a few new elements, in most respects it was the traditional Calvinist message. In Edwards's "conception of the universe," as Marsden explains, "God had created lower things to be signs that pointed to higher spiritual realities. The universe, then, was a complex language of God. Nothing in it was accidental. Everything pointed to higher meaning" (Marsden 2003: 77). The encounter with nature was not merely educational but for Edwards also a profoundly moving religious experience of the world's wonders as well:

[Edwards's] contemplative joys were of a piece with his philosophy and theology. His ineffable experiences as he walked along in the fields were of the beauties of God's love communicated in nature. That created world was the very language of God. As Psalm 19 said, "The heavens declare the glory of God." The beauty of nature proclaimed the beauty and love of Christ. Indeed, in creation, as the Lord declared to Job, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). Enraptured by the beauties of God's ongoing creation, Jonathan recorded, "it was always my manner, at such times, to sing forth my contemplations." (Marsden 2003: 78)

These views about nature were not the main source, however, of his theological fame. Edwards was particularly concerned to combat the many spreading falsehoods of the Enlightenment period. He harshly condemned the new thinking and reasserted traditional Calvinist messages with great force, as illustrated graphically in his most famous
sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." At one point in this sermon, he applied his theological views to consider briefly the relationship of human beings and nature, emphasizing that human beings were altogether undeserving themselves and had only God to thank for the many useful things they were able to obtain from the products of the natural world. Indeed, without God's great mercy and His assistance, grave sinfulness and women long ago would justly have perished from the earth. As Edwards explained to the congregation sitting before him:

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell.... Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly, the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts.... God's creatures are good, and were made for men to serve God with, and do not willingly subordinate to any other purpose, and groan when they are abused to purposes so directly contrary to their nature and end. And the world would spew you out, were it not for the sovereign hand of him who had subjected it in hope. (Edwards 1998: 26)

Prominent environmentalists today see human actions in "raping," "killing," and otherwise abusing nature—often justified by economic religion—as evidence of a similar depravity. The one large difference is the absence now of any environmental mention of a divine plan behind it all. Even though human beings were often loathsome creatures in Edwards's view, God had a purpose for them, and they ultimately would be saved (or at least some of them) and would join with God in heaven. Without God's saving actions, and if there were any justice in the world, it would now seem that the disgusting human creatures that have defiled the natural order, as Edwards so vividly portrayed them, might best rapidly perish from the earth. This conclusion does in fact readily follow from some of the main founding premises of current secular environmentalism, a "Calvinism minus God"—although pragmatic environmentalists, recognizing a great danger here politically, have hardly been anxious to clarify such radical implications of their theology for the American public at large.

One of America's foremost environmental historians, William Cronon, finds that this logic, as he agrees is embodied within the core tenets of environmental theology, is a significant problem for the environmental movement. Environmentalism seeks to protect wilderness areas from human impacts as a core statement of its religious convictions. But, as Cronon notes, if the main message of environmental religion is carried to its full extent, "it is hard not to reach the conclusion that the only way human beings can hope to live naturally on the earth is to follow the hunter-gatherers back into a wilderness Eden and abandon virtually everything that civilization has given us." We would have to renounce the economic progress of the modern age. Indeed, it might be even more logically coherent to conclude that, "if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves." While the vast majority of environmentalists would no doubt reject this conclusion, if presented so baldly, Cronon finds that the line
of thinking of "radical environmentalists and deep ecologists all too frequently come[s] close to implicitly accepting" an ending of the human presence on earth "as a first principle," the ultimate goal (Cronon 1996a: 76, 78; see also Cronon 1996b). In a world without God, Edwards would have very likely agreed with this verdict, as suggested in his sermon quoted above.

V. CALVINISM WITHOUT ORIGINAL SIN

Edwards, however, was on the losing side of intellectual and theological history for more than two centuries after his death in 1758. The great successors to Edwards in New England religion were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who offered a more favorable judgment on the human condition. Perry Miller comments that, nevertheless, "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 every proposition Ralph Waldo Emerson blandly put forth in the manifesto of 1836, Nature." 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." 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." One might thus, as Miller states, "define Emerson as an Edwards in whom the concept of original sin has evaporated" (Miller 1956: 184–85).

The traditional Christian understanding of original sin was already proving difficult for the modern mind well before Emerson. How could one poor judgment by one man and one woman long ago in a distant Garden (assuming Adam and Eve even existed) have condemned the entire human species to many thousands of future years of terrible sinfulness and depravity? Moreover, since God was omniscient and omnipotent, He seemingly could easily have prevented it. Modern scientific discoveries were also showing that rational human capacities could be extraordinarily great, apparently contradicting Calvin's expectation of the warping and other harmful consequences for human reason of original sin. Indeed, it seemed increasingly likely to many people that modern science and economics might enable human beings to build a whole new wonderful world of their own design—that human beings might in fact be acquiring the necessary knowledge to build by themselves their own new heaven on earth.

If original sin was removed from the Christian equation, however, and as Edwards had full well understood, the result would no longer be the historic Christian religion. As the Bible taught, Jesus atoned for the sins of mankind but Christ's life would now have much less meaning in a world without original sin. Emerson was a pivotal figure in American intellectual history because he and others like him in New England transcendentalism
represented the critical point of transition to a new type of Christianity (or, for some people, they might not recognize it as a legitimate form of Christianity at all; Richardson 1995). There was much talk of God in many transcendentalist writings but little of Jesus Christ.

The radical theological implications of discarding the idea of original sin are seen in the much altered significance of "human nature." As described above, Calvinism had traditionally looked outward to the natural world—the Creation—as an accurate mirror of the mind of God. Looking inward to human nature with the same objective was problematic at best because the original human nature at the Creation had been so severely warped and distorted by Adam and Eve's transgression. A man or woman looking inward thus would find something that was a misleading or even a perverted version of God's original plan at the Creation. But what if original sin was a false doctrine of superstitious and ignorant centuries preceding the modern era of Enlightenment? Looking inward, a person might now find yet another accurate reflection of the mind of God. Indeed, Christianity had long taught that human beings were created "in the image of God" but now this divine resemblance might be much more readily accessible to introspective viewing by uncorrupted human beings.

Emerson thus wrote that "the whole of Nature is a metaphor or image of the human Mind." The natural world was not only a mirror of God's thinking but the minds of ordinary human beings as well. The newfound extraordinary ability of the physical sciences to penetrate the mysteries of nature—to establish precise correlations between mathematical ideas formed in human minds and the workings of the natural world—suggested this as well. Again in Emerson's own words, "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 Eikich 1963: 51). There was one great cosmic order of the universe to be found in heaven, in the natural world, and within human beings themselves, available to be seen and experienced by those who merely knew how to look closely. As Emerson wrote 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.

In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God... we return to reason and faith. Where I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes) which nature cannot repair... All mean egotism vanishes... I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

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, preexist 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. (Emerson 1990: 17–18, 32)

In *Man and Nature in America*, Arthur Ekrich thus explained that Emerson was a "secular preacher" and that New England "transcendentalism was not a formal philosophy but was rather a faith—one might almost say a religious faith" whose basic tenets provided "substitutes for the teachings of the [Christian] church." In Emerson's new—but in many ways old—theology, "all nature... was a unity in which man as an observer played his part—observer being fused with the observed" in a happy mutual interconnection. Invoking a long-standing Calvinist formulation, Emerson still agrees that the natural world is "intermediary between God and man" and thus has "carried a portion of the Divinity to each individual." In a more novel element, however, in seeking to find a mirror of God, "what faculty could be relied on for the finding with more confidence than the intuition of the individual man, made in the image of the Maker." For Emerson and others in New England, "the transcendentalists' God was a God of love, not of hate, who revealed himself in man and nature," as found right here and now on this earth (Ekirch 1963: 47–51).

Yet, there were some discordant notes, if no longer attributed to original sin in the traditional biblical manner. Indeed, the consequences of original sin had not disappeared altogether. The corrupting influence, however, was no longer to be found in a snake in a garden but in the rapid pace of economic development of mid-nineteenth-century America. Human beings could be led into many evils by the pressures and the temptations of the surrounding industrial world in which they lived. Thus, at times, "Emerson was wont... to inveigh against society and the uncritical admiration of progress.... If society seemed noxious, nature was the antidote against its baleful influence" (Ekirch 1963: 53). In this respect, Emerson reflected a new trend to find the main source of corruption of human motives and behavior, not in a biblical Eden, but in the external economic conditions of this world. Today, the environmental movement also newly questions the true human benefits of rapid economic growth and development. To worship economic progress is for environmentalism yet again to worship a false god.

Henry David Thoreau was a better writer, a closer observer of the details of nature, and in general showed an iconoclasm with respect to social conventions not found in Emerson (Richardson 1986). Thoreau was still more skeptical of the directions of modern industrial civilization and all its works of "progress." The rapid rate of economic growth was eradicating more and more of the natural places where the handiwork of God could be seen. In these respects, he was closer to the present-day environmental movement and Thoreau in fact holds a higher position than Emerson among the saints of environmentalism. The language of Thoreau seems contemporary while Emerson, however central to American intellectual and religious history, speaks in an idiom with which most people now have little familiarity. Both, however, as the environmental philosopher Mark Sagoff (2008: 111) puts it, following in the long Calvinist tradition of New England, "thought of nature as full of divinity," as a "refuge from economic activity, not
as a resource for it.” When economists today advocate using “natural resources” more efficiently, it is yet another example of the widespread of economic heresy in our times.

VI. Emerson’s Sierra Disciple

For all his radical language at times, John Muir was well within the American mainstream. He was the founder of the Sierra Club in 1892, helped to bring about the creation of Yosemite National Park, vigorously advocated the preservationist cause in leading national magazines, consorted with American presidents, and was in general a mover and shaker of his times. While some of his writings and lifestyle were closer to Thoreau, his ability to influence American society directly through his public exhortations was closer to Emerson. Muir himself was well aware of the debt, regarding Emerson as his mentor and spiritual inspiration.

Well before he became a celebrated national figure, Muir spent much of his thirties wandering through the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, experiencing wild nature directly. He published a few items from these years but most of his thinking was recorded in personal journals from the 1870s. Although largely unpublished in his own lifetime, they were later assembled in a 1938 publication (reprinted in 1979). As the editor, Linnie Marsh Wolfe, comments, they showed Muir developing his “transcendental philosophy [that] he poured white-hot into his journals.” It provided a written record of how “when John Muir went into the wilderness, he went in absolute surrender of self and all the concerns of self,” experiencing the wilderness as a place “filled with warm God” (Wolfe 1979: xii, xi). Muir had been brought up in a devout Calvinist family and—even as he rejected much of Christian religion as an adult—never lost the traditional Calvinist celebration of nature as a direct conduit to the mind of God.

Muir also had a characteristically Protestant skepticism of formal theology and other human efforts to communicate the word of God such as played a larger role historically in Roman Catholic religion. He explained in 1872 that “I have a low opinion of books; they are but piles of stones set up to show coming travelers where other minds have been, or at best signal smokes to call attention.” Having less confidence in the Bible than his Calvinist predecessors, Muir was preoccupied with nature, the one remaining source for him of direct communication with God, writing 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” (Muir 1979: 94–95).

Drawing heavily on Emerson, and Calvin and Edwards in earlier centuries, Muir elaborated on the divine messages he encountered in the Yosemite region:

The glacier-polish of rounded bays 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!

Not a cloud-memory in the sky. Not a ripple-memory on the lake, as if so complete in immortality that the very lake pulse were no longer needed, as if only the spiritual part of landscape life were left. 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!' (Muir 1979: 83–84)

Muir similarly wrote of the arrival of spring that "rising from the dead, the work of the year is pushed on with enthusiasm as if never done before, as if all God's glory depended upon it: inspiring every plant, bird and stream to sing with youth's exuberance, painting flower petals, making leaf patterns, weaving a fresh roof—all symbols of eternal love." In urbanized "cities by the sea," by contrast, many people's lives were "chocked by the weeds of care that have grown up and run to seed about them." Economic cares diverted them from deeper realities. There was hope for them, however, because "earth has no sorrows that earth cannot heal, or heaven cannot heal, for the earth as seen in the clean wilds of the mountains is about as divine as anything the heart of man can conceive." The sinners of the world can be saved, if only they will go to wild nature to see God's Creation there. Muir himself saw a close connection to Christian religion in his own brand of proselytizing, writing in 1871 (at the age of 33) that "heaven knows that John [the] Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains" (Muir 1979: 86, 97–99).

The Sierras for Muir thus were a source of religious ecstasy to match that felt by any monk, pilgrim, or other Christian faithful of the past. Describing how he was transfixed by religious enthusiasm, losing all sense of earthly concerns, in the experience of Sierra wild nature, Muir wrote:

Mountains holy as Sinai. No mountains I know of are so alluring. None so hospitable, kindly, tenderly inspiring. It seems strange that everybody does not come at their call. They are given, like the Gospel, without money and without price. 'Tis heaven alone that is given away.

Here is calm so deep, grasses cease waving.... Wondering how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains, is our song, our very own, and sings our love.

The Song of God, sounding on forever. So pure and sure and universal is the harmony, it matters not where we are, where we strike in on the wild lowland plains. We care not to go to the mountains, and on the mountains we care not to go the plains. But as soon as we are absorbed in the harmony, plain, mountain, calm, storm, lilies and sequoias, forest and meads are only different strands of the many-colored Light—are one in the sunbeam. (Muir 1979: 92)
From 1890 to his death in 1914, Muir was the leading figure in American public life in advocating the preservation of wild nature in parks and other areas specially set aside for this purpose. The national parks, as Muir thought, would be the American cathedrals of an environmental religion in which a person could experience at first hand the artwork of God in nature. Occasionally, Muir even seemed to suggest that God might literally be in nature, crossing a fine line that can easily lead to the heresy of pantheism. As law professor Joseph Sax acknowledged (1980: 104), he and other preservationist advocates for the National Park System were "secular prophets, preaching a message of secular salvation."

VII. SINNERS AGAINST THE EARTH

The high point of American optimism was the Progressive Era that extended from the late nineteenth century through the first two decades of the twentieth century. The follies of World War I, however, severely challenged the great hopes for human advance based on scientific and economic progress, and there would be even more horrifying events to come in the 1930s and 1940s. Besides the many examples of terrible human treatment of other human beings, there were also growing evidences of human sinfulness in the callous treatment of the natural world, including the elimination of some plant and animal species from the earth, or in many more cases reduced to small remnant populations. The times were ripe for a reassertion of the Calvinist belief in human depravity as a central feature of human existence.

It was in environmental religion, in opposition to the progressive optimism of economic religion, that such Calvinist themes reappeared. One outlet for a revived Calvinism was the environmental organization Earth First! (founded in 1980). Its founder, Dave Foreman, had been brought up in the same branch of Calvinist religion as Muir (the Cambellites, an offshoot of Presbyterianism), and briefly considered becoming a minister. Instead, and like Muir, he became an environmental preacher. Reflecting the secular temper of the late twentieth century in environmental circles, Foreman said little about either God (in this respect unlike Muir) or Jesus (more like Muir). As one outside observer commented, however, there was an obvious character of "residual Protestant evangelism" to Foreman's own efforts and the reactions of his followers (Cittadino 2006: 104).

Earth First! never sought to be and never was an important player in the Washington halls of power. In several important ways, however, it has a significant place in the history of American environmentalism. First, important environmental writers such as Edward Abbey (1968) identified and worked closely with Earth First! Second, Foreman and others in Earth First! pushed logical premises widely accepted throughout the environmental movement to more radical conclusions and outcomes than mainstream environmentalists were willing to reach—whether for reasons of personal timidity, political calculation, intellectual confusion, hypocrisy,
or whatever. And third, by taking radical positions, and gaining wide public attention, Earth First! helped to shift the mainstream of environmental debate (Foreman 1991). The leading environmental organizations never came close to adopting Earth First!'s full agenda but its radical positions made it politically more acceptable to move in those directions. As Susan Zakin (1993: 359) reports in her history of Earth First!, "after the Bald mountain blockades" in 1983, "Earth First! became a prominent feature in the political landscape of the [Pacific] Northwest," helping to set the stage for the large-scale elimination of federal timber harvesting in the region that would occur later in the 1980s and early 1990s in the wake of the northern spotted owl controversy (Chase 1995).

It should also be said that an important factor in Earth First!'s success was, bluntly, its success in applying terrorist methods. It was motivated, like a number of other terrorist organizations, by a powerful sense of religious mission. Again like other terrorists, it was particularly skillful in the use of violent tactics to gain wide publicity. This was before 9/11 and Americans were more tolerant of, and sometimes even fascinated by, such tactics. Earth First! also limited its terrorist acts to destruction of logging equipment, ski lifts, power lines, government offices, housing projects, and other public and private property. No person, as it appears, was killed by an Earth First! act of "monkey wrenching," although some may have been injured (Abbey 1976).

Political scientist Martha Lee wrote her doctoral dissertation on Earth First!, based on four years of research, and published it in a revised version in 1995 as Earth First!: Environmental Apocalypse. As Lee (1995: x) comments, "throughout Earth First!'s history, its adherents grappled with issues such as the nature of political community, the definition of justice, and the degree to which human life is meaningful." None of their conclusions were written down in any authoritative book, but the members of Earth First! did agree on many things. Lee personally interviewed, sometimes multiple times, the leaders, and studied the many inspirational political and other pamphlets produced by Earth First! As Lee (1995: x) says, "if we take environmentalism seriously, and follow it to its logical conclusion, we must confront many of the issues" that Earth First! so aggressively pushed before the American public.

In 1980, as Earth First! was being organized, Foreman wrote the following founding "Statement of Principles:"

Wilderness has a right to exist for its own sake.

All life forms, from virus[es] to the great whales, have an inherent and equal right to existence.

Humankind is no greater than any other form of life and has no legitimate claim to dominate Earth.

Humankind, through overpopulation, anthropocentrism, industrialization, excessive energy consumption/resource extraction, state capitalism, father-figure hierarchies, imperialism, pollution, and natural area destruction, threatens the basic life processes of EARTH.

All human decisions should consider Earth first, humankind second.
The only true test of morality is whether an action, individual, social or political, benefits Earth. Humankind will be happier, healthier, more secure, and more comfortable in a society that recognizes humankind's true biological nature and which is in dynamic harmony with the total biosphere.
Political compromise has no place in the defense of Earth. (Quoted in Lee 1995: 39)

As Lee comments, "these principles form the basis for a radical critique of the traditional way environmental questions are addressed in American society." They are the core of a "biocentric perspective" that emphasizes the importance of protecting "biodiversity" in the world. Narrowly economic human concerns are to be spurned. The "absolute good," against which "all actions should be judged," is found in "wilderness" values. In terms of the species of the earth, all are "recognized as being equal and of [the same] intrinsic value." Any political or other "compromise" with wilderness goals, such as the destruction of nature for economic purposes, "becomes an act against good, that is, evil." As a result, because their actions were "destroying the ecosystems that sustained the planet," it was a moral judgment to declare that "the American government and corporate infrastructure embodied the evil of human greed." As Lee explains, "Earth Firsters transplanted these ideas from the realm of philosophical speculation to human action" and thus elevated them in public visibility and political impact—indeed, with remarkable success for such a small number of people (Lee 1995: 39-40).

Although Lee labels it a "philosophy," the character of Earth First! efforts is essentially religious. There were other elements traditionally associated with religion, and specifically Western religion. Earth First! documents were filled with prophesies of the "imminent collapse" of Western civilization. Lee comments that in such writings "the inevitability of the impending crisis is a certainty, but its specifics and the exact date of its occurrence are unknown. The nature of the coming disaster will, however, reflect society's abuse of the environment, and it is understood to be imminent." This was certain because of the total "corruption" of the system. It was also an outcome to be desired because each day that the system's "destruction continues, more irreplaceable wilderness is lost." Without radical change soon, the whole world faced "biological meltdown" (Lee 1995: 40-41). It was the Old Testament rewritten to 1980s environmental metaphors, yet another story of human beings behaving in evil ways and thus bringing on the punishments of a just Earth (God).

The members of Earth First!, like many other religious sects before them, also believed that they had a unique access to the truths that will "dictate the order of the world," and as the "bearers" of this truth, they are the "chosen people" whose role will be "pivotal in the history of the world." They could foresee and were urgently warning of the looming "ecocatastrophe" that would cause the loss of one third to one half of the earth's species, if drastic changes in contemporary ways of living were not made (stated in more biblical terms, if human beings did not curb their wicked ways). Writing in the Earth First! Journal, for example, one early member described "the salvation that Earth Firsters envisioned" (Lee 1995: 17, 42-43):
The Earth is our first love, our first concern. Our children must be imbued with an unswerving sense of responsibility and respect for Her, and a recognition of the significance of our role leads to even greater dedication. Grant understanding to our fellows but show no compromise...Earth first!...[She] must live Her healthy, tumbling life, free from a dread of infestation and misdeed. As Her seed, we become ambassadors [sic], emissaries in the final drama, and our mission is indeed grand. (Quoted in Lec 1995: 43)

The members of Earth First! had the characteristically Protestant skepticism of any formal theology, arguing that the scholarly study of books was of limited benefit, directly experiencing "Earth" was central, and mainly a person either "got it," or didn't, and there were only a select few in the former category, leaving the mass of Americans in effect among the ignorant—the new condemned. Similarly, echoing the traditional Calvinist idea that the elect are predestined, Foreman believed that recognizing and acting on the truths of biocentrism required having the right "gene"—you were either born with it (God had chosen you) or not. The Earth First! theology was in fact Protestant and specifically Calvinist through and through. The powerful Calvinist elements, however, were buried in a torrent of linguistic obfuscation, likely designed to hide the Calvinist origins, not only from the American public, but from the Earth First! members themselves.

The translation of the Earth First! religion to ordinary language is less difficult than say the deciphering of the hieroglyphics of the Ancient Egyptians. In fact, in many cases, it requires a mere substitution of one new word, "God," in place of the word "Earth." There is not much novelty in a Western religion of "God First!" Consider a few of Foreman's founding principles as described above and the effect of merely substituting the word "God" for the word "Earth." The result is a set of religious commandments including: (1) "All human decisions should consider God first, humankind second"; (2) "The only true test of morality is whether an action, individual, social or political, benefits God"; and (3) "Political compromise has no place in the defense of God." Or, consider the Earth First! statement above that "The Earth is our first love, our first concern," which would become "God is our first love, our first concern."

When Foreman and others in Earth First! profess to find a basis for a new morality in the defense of mother "Earth," it is obvious that they are not listening to anything the mountains and trees are saying literally in words—since they are saying nothing. They are not regarding the earth in the manner of physical science, as a domain in which mathematical laws of nature control the behavior of all the objects ranging from atoms to planets. They are also not thinking of a Darwinist world of bitter competitive struggle to the finish. What the members of Earth First! mean is actually the same message that Calvinists have preached in various forms for centuries. God has created the world and so one finds in the natural world a mirror or reflection of the mind of God. By entering and experiencing nature, or as Foreman now rephrased it, by heeding the messages of "the Earth," one is gaining access to the divine truths of the universe. Obedience to God's requirements as thus revealed must command a higher priority than any economic or other mundane human concerns of this world.
Compared with Muir, Foreman also added considerably more of the traditional Calvinist sense of human depravity—a significant new dose for environmentalism, as one might say, of Jonathan Edwards, reflecting the increased awareness by the late twentieth century that human sinfulness in the world hardly seemed to be abating and indeed could even be increasing. The terrible sinners of the current world will soon be punished severely, and yet in the massive ecological collapse there will be the hope for better things to come—a world that will have seen many of the evils of “the system” washed away by the widespread destruction.

VIII. Conclusion

Calvinism, as brought to the United States by the Puritans in the seventeenth century, has had a great influence on American history. The American sense of offering a missionary example to the whole world, the strong individualism as seen in free markets and democratic political institutions, the tendency to see public events in terms of a basic struggle between good and evil, and other main themes of American history all derive in significant part from the nation’s Puritan heritage. Most of these connections have been exhaustively explored by historians and other writers. In the case of American environmentalism, however, the Calvinist and Puritan roots have attracted less attention. Indeed, many recent commentators have missed them altogether, portraying environmentalism as some kind of “pagan” or “eastern” religion, alien to the American experience. Yet, the rise of environmentalism is yet another episode in the Puritan history of America. The large public impact of American environmentalism in recent decades reflects the fact that it has resonated so well and so deep with the nation’s long-standing Puritan habits of thought.

Many Americans, to be sure, are also devout believers in the redeeming benefits of economic progress. This creates a deep tension in American thought that might be more disconcerting to Americans if they recognized it more clearly. Environmental religion also faces a large theological problem in that, as I explore in detail in other writings, its vision of “the creation” is difficult to reconcile with Darwin (see Nelson 2010b: Part 3). But it is hardly unprecedented to find a nation—or an individual—believing in contradictory things. Yet, intellectual—or theological—confusion is likely to lead to policy confusion, as has been evident at many times and places in American economic and environmental history.

In the near future there is not likely to be any simple resolution of the conflict between environmental religion and economic religion. Much of the task of American intellectual life of the next few decades will be to sort out these competing worldviews, seeking an adequate blending of their clashing understandings of the human condition. Rather than continuing “the new holy wars,” perhaps one can at least hope for a new era of “secular ecumenicism.”
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