



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Dunlap, Thomas R. "Environmentalism, a Secular Faith."
Environmental Values 15, no. 3, (2006): 321-330.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5970>

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Environmentalism, a Secular Faith

THOMAS R. DUNLAP

*History Department
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas 77843-4236
Email: t-dunlap@tamu.edu*

ABSTRACT

Much of American environmentalism's passion and political power, as well as shortcomings and tactical failures, have their origin in the movement's demands for new attitudes toward nature as well as new laws and policies. A full understanding of environmentalism requires seeing it as a secular faith, movement concerned with ultimate questions of humans' place and purpose in the world. This perspective explains much about its development, its emphasis on individual action, the vehemence of its opposition, and its political failure in the last generation. Comparisons with other national environmental movements, not considered here, constitute an important topic for further research.

KEY WORDS

Religion, secular faith, environmental ethics, environmentalism, wilderness

Scholars commonly treat environmentalism as a political movement, part of an industrial society's campaign to save nature from civilisation, and environmentalists usually see it in the same way. That explains much but leaves out even more. Environmentalism became a political force with astonishing speed, drastically changed regulation of nature and natural resources, and after a generation still holds the loyalties of millions of Americans, guiding not only their political choices but ones they make in daily living. It called for reforms but went beyond, for reforms aimed at justice in society, and the movement spoke about humans' relationship to the world. Besides telling people who to vote for and what programs to support it counselled them on what car to drive (and why they should shun cars if they could), what sort of grass to plant in the front lawn, and what kind of diapers to put on the baby. More than right action in society it asked people to get right with the universe. That ultimately religious element provided much of the power and passion behind the movement, and seeing it

from that perspective helps account for its immediate, deep, and so far lasting appeal, the fervour of its advocates and the passion of its opponents, its emphasis on a morality of daily life, and some of its current problems.

This paper lays out some aspects of environmentalism as a religious movement and suggests what scholars and environmentalists might learn by taking this view. Seeing religion not in terms of creeds or denominations but as an expression of humans' need to find a place in the universe and a purpose in life shows the movement and its opposition as variations of the dominant secular faith in reason and science as sufficient to explain a wholly material world. Environmentalism appealed to ecology and the American tradition of nature preservation as guides to bring humans into harmony with nature, while anti-environmentalists held to the American orthodoxy of the conquest of nature as the avenue to prosperity and the accumulation of consumer goods as the way to happiness. Environmentalism grew so rapidly because it spoke with the support of science – the culture's authoritative source of information – and in the familiar terms of Thoreau and Muir, while offering a new path and meeting needs the conventional faith dismissed or neglected. Seeing environmentalism in these terms explains much about its current confusions and debates: they come from environmentalists' unwillingness to acknowledge the fundamental nature of their commitment.

Analysing environmentalism as a religious movement requires a broad view of religion, something like William James's in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he saw it as 'the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto'. Religion arose from the 'sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand. The solution is a sense that *we are saved from wrongness* by making proper connection to the higher powers'.¹ Religion, from that perspective, flowed from humans' need to make sense of their lives in this world, and beliefs that gave answers to those questions were religious ones, though they might not be complete (in the sense of answering all important questions), might deny deities or even the possibility of transcendence, might even rely on other systems they called religion (as the American Way of Life did) to supplement their creeds. Environmentalism fell into that category. It described humans, seeing them as one species among many in the Earth's complex ecosystems, and it saw our destruction of the natural world as a crisis that required us to change our ways and work not to conquer nature but to preserve the ecosystems on which we depended. By so doing we would save the earth and continue the evolution of life on earth. It grounded its beliefs in the secular world view that arose in the seventeenth century with modern science and evolved into a secular religion as science explained more and more of the world's workings and technology made it less and less necessary to call on Divine Intervention. As it became possible to believe in an entirely material universe that humans could grasp the cultural centre of gravity shifted from revelation to reason. In the twentieth century most

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educated people dismissed 'religion' as folk belief, superstition, or a stage of cultural progress we had, happily, passed beyond – at any rate something no one with any pretensions to knowledge or sophistication took seriously. Science became the only acceptable source of understanding and objective, reproducible data the only knowledge. Supernatural religions, formerly the necessary support of civilisation and the foundation of society, became private opinions.

Environmentalism built on this foundation, which, despite its advocates' fervent declarations, rested on faith, for it could no more be demonstrated that humans could understand the universe than that a white-bearded God in a robe created it in six twenty-four hour days, no more proved that our senses showed us everything there was than that the righteous would after death sit around on clouds and strum harps. Denying it was a faith, the modern secular religion became the faith that dared not speak its name, but it did not need to. As the accepted account of the world it escaped scrutiny. To this understanding environmentalism added a view of nature Ralph Waldo Emerson and his disciples (particularly Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs) made part of American culture – nature as the doorway to higher realities, a spiritual refuge and a source of wisdom – and that Americans made the basis for nature preservation into the 1960s. 'In wildness is the preservation of the world', Thoreau said, and the Sierra Club emblazoned that, with an Ansel Adams picture, on devotional posters. Ecology, showing how our daily actions shaped nature, placed scientific foundations under Transcendentalism's moral and spiritual quest and gave people a guide by which to shape their daily lives.

Environmentalism's political programme began at this deeper level and drew inspiration and energy from it. People read *Silent Spring* for its warnings about pesticide residues in our bodies but made it a foundation text for the movement because it called for a new relationship between humans and nature. Carson said that the "'control of nature" [was] a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man', and she called on us learn to live and work with nature.² Environmentalists treasured the lyrical passages about the life of the land in Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* but put the book in their canon for its call for us to abandon the role of conqueror and take our place as plain citizens of the biotic community. They made into holy writ the 'land ethic', which framed humans' relations to the land in moral terms: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'³ E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* became a touchstone of environmental thought because it built an economics that rejected the 'meta-economic basis of western materialism' and changed the goal of economics from 'development' to the development of humans. Schumacher used the teachings of Buddhism to construct this new system but said that the 'teachings of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism could have been used just as well as those of any of the great Eastern traditions'.⁴ Environmentalism made from

these and other writings a vision of a new earth, if not a new heaven, where humans lived with and healed the land, breaking down the barriers that alienated humans from nature, each other and even themselves. It held out a vision and suggested a purpose to people who rejected the heaven of conventional religions and found no satisfaction in the earthly paradise of consumer goods.

That deep concern still drives the movement. In the mid-1980s, as momentum for political change failed, environmentalists searched for a 'root cause' of the movement's problems, and they argued more strongly over the relation between humans and nature and the larger goals of environmental action than about tactics or even strategy (though these were heated as well). At one end Dave Foreman championed a deep ecology concerned with nature against Murray Bookchin's call for a social ecology focused on humans. Reaction to William Cronon's 1995 article, 'The Trouble with Wilderness', showed how seriously environmentalists took these issues. Cronon's suggestion that we might be paying too much attention to 'wilderness', which he described as a 'profoundly human construct', and ignoring nature in our ordinary lives brought a storm of criticism, including two rebuttals in an academic journal, *Environmental History*, most of an issue in Dave Foreman's magazine, *Wild Earth* and a continuing trickle of accusations.⁵ Critics said he did not believe the world outside us was real, was hostile to wilderness – positions a fair reading of his work did not support – and gave aid and comfort to developers, but they opposed most strongly his claim that 'wilderness' was a human construction, a position that raised no eyebrows in Western philosophy or environmental history, where scholars not only admitted 'wilderness' was an idea but analysed its growth and change over time. To the faithful wilderness was not a name we gave to some part of the land but ultimate reality.

Environmentalists were not alone in framing issues in fundamental terms. Their opponents did the same thing. While admirers saw Rachel Carson as a modern nature saint, speakers for the National Agricultural Chemicals Association accused her of betraying humanity. Humans, they said, must and should conquer nature, and modern society wrote a glorious page in the annals of civilisation by developing the wonderful chemicals that saved so many people from disease and so much food from the ravenous hordes of our insect enemies. Carson opposed Progress and civilisation and wanted to lead us back to the caves to live on nuts and berries and die an early death from disease. Injured professional pride and economic interest played some role here but so did a deep faith in reason as a sufficient instrument to bend the world to our will and faith that conquest was our destiny as humans. A decade after *Silent Spring* the Club of Rome's computer model of the world system, *The Limits to Growth*, drew criticism 'from the left and the right and the middle. The book was banned in the Soviet Union and investigated by President Nixon's staff. The Mobil Corporation ran ads saying "growth is not a four-letter word".'⁶ Communists as well as capitalists believed in Progress and triumphant technology. Recently, believers in the conventional

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wisdom hailed first Greg Easterbrook's *A Moment on the Earth*, then Björn Lomborg's *Skeptical Environmentalist*, as rational answers to environmentalists' emotional conjectures, and its believers welcomed Lomborg, a self-confessed former environmentalist, back to the fold with all the enthusiasm of a preacher rejoicing over the lamb that was lost but has been found.

Environmentalism did pose a fundamental choice, for the 'conquest of nature' and living as 'a plain citizen of the biotic community' involved different ways of accepting the universe. One denied humans were part of nature and saw the world as just raw material; the other held that the world was our home and wild nature had values beyond money or human satisfaction. That environmentalism and anti-environmentalism relied on the same modern secular faith raised the stakes, for believers hate heretics more than they do unbelievers. Unbelievers only fail to recognise the truth, heretics distort it. Environmentalists felt their opponents held to discredited idols, Man the Conqueror and the Gross National Product, refusing to see science's judgment that we must live with nature if we are to survive, while anti-environmentalists regarded talk of limits and dependence as a betrayal of the human destiny to conquer the earth (or in the more enthusiastic versions the galaxy), and they described Greens as believers in a new paganism that hated people and worshipped trees.

Environmentalism flourished, despite positions troubling to the American Way of Life, because it gave people a way to understand and attack problems they saw around them, and because it spoke to needs the accepted secular faith ignored. It showed things as diverse as vanishing wilderness and the alienation of modern society as symptoms of a deeper, spiritual malaise – our failure to live in right relationship with the world around us. It offered (in those first years somewhat too enthusiastically) jeremiads – warnings of disaster if we followed our sinful ways, directions to the path of righteousness, and the promise of an Earthly Paradise if we reformed our ways – and told us how we should live. Like an established religious tradition, pointing the path to sainthood, offering comfort to the masses, and holding open the door to the repentant sinner, it had ways of work for all. It offered the committed bioregionalism, a life lived on the land, learning its possibilities and building a community that would unite humans and nature and heal them. Those yearning for an immediate, complete commitment it sent to defend wilderness, where they might even earn a martyr's crown, and it told the interested but cautious or conventional to set up recycling programmes, buy green products, and put their money in green retirement funds.

Environmentalism also met needs the conventional faith did not. The American Way of Life emphasised individual autonomy, power and self-realisation through accumulation, but said little or nothing about people's deep hunger to belong to a community and have a place in it, their wish for a cause greater than themselves for which they might work, and their desire to feel they would in some way survive death. To those seeking a community and a place, it spoke of a re-defined community that included the land and of lives lived in service

of healing this greater system. To those looking for commitment and action it had the cause of saving the planet, our species and the ongoing processes of evolution. Secular faith ignored the possibility of life after death, a lack even so militant an atheist as George Orwell found troubling, calling the decline in a belief in immortality the 'major problem of our time', one that 'has been as important as the rise of machine civilisation', and saying the loss of that belief 'has left a big hole, and ... we ought to take notice of the fact'.⁷ Environmentalism did not speak of personal immortality but it has an ecological interpretation of an accepted virtual one, our bodies contributing to the round of life after death. That we returned to the earth everyone acknowledged, even if they denied ultimate significance to the fact, and Romanticism found in that cycle a secular immortality. Look for me, said Whitman, under your boot soles, and Robinson Jeffers and Edward Abbey spoke of our passing on into the lives of hawks or vultures. Ecology gave that new meaning, and environmentalists added ceremony to the act of returning our phosphorous to the planetary pool. People had their ashes scattered in national parks and wilderness areas or their bodies buried in an environmentally friendly way – without embalming fluids or other environmental poisons.

While environmentalism drew strength from its religious foundations, environmentalists' failure to see their cause in those terms created obstacles. Seeing ultimate significance in their actions but denying their religious commitment they steered an erratic course. They rejected, for instance, the conventional belief that all values could be reduced to dollars, insisting wilderness and wild nature were beyond price, but they struggled to say what its value was. One collection of papers on wilderness found some thirty justifications for it; plans to preserve wilderness relied on everything from removing its commercial value to capitalising on it; and appeals for wilderness piled one argument on top of another, apparently hoping if one did not convince readers another would. Because the first article of the modern secular faith was that it was not a faith but an understanding of the world based in reason and observation, environmentalists used science for ends it could not serve. Ecology could say what species were becoming extinct and what we should do if we wanted to save them, but not why we should want to. Greenpeace activists running their boats between whales and whaling ship and Earth First!ers risking jail to spike trees called on something more than science, but their explanations agreed only on outrage and aesthetics. People appealing to the land ethic had the same problem, for while ecology could measure the changes humans made in the world's ecosystems, it could not say that complexity or stability, much less beauty, were good things or desirable goals in an ecosystem. In drawing on fundamental beliefs but refusing to see them as such environmentalists created contradictions and blind spots. The more obvious problems lay in the defence of wilderness and the campaign for green consumerism, but environmentalism's view of the good life suggested

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others, and the difficulties of reconciling the land ethic with the American Dream pointed to deeper questions the movement needed to work through.

Environmentalism redefined wilderness, which Romantic preservation had seen in terms of aesthetic beauty and pioneer America, as land that showed nature's systems working as they should, undamaged by industrial civilisation, but it embraced its view of wilderness as sacred space, a refuge from society and an opening to ultimate reality and meaning. It made the defence of wilderness, particularly old-growth forests, a holy cause. Activists blocked roads, lay down in front of bulldozers, spiked trees, sabotaged construction equipment, and camped in redwoods to save them from the chainsaws. They did this because they saw wilderness as reality. Like fundamentalist Christians refusing to see the Bible as a set of texts produced at different times and within particular cultures, they placed wilderness outside historical and cultural context, and like Biblical literalists, holding that the book spoke to all who came with an open heart, believed wilderness preached to all. They did not quite appeal to the insight of the unlettered that confounds the learning of the wise, but they did see wilderness as ultimate reality, something that could not be analysed but had to be experienced. That stopped analysis and made academic discussion (like Cronon's 'The Trouble with Wilderness') at best irrelevant, at worst impious mental meddling with that which lay beyond our ken – a position at odds with environmentalists' belief in science and reason as our guides to policies that would save the planet but still deeply comforting.

The contradictions of green consumerism showed the problems of working within the system on its terms. From the late 1960s environmentalists argued for the power of consumer choice as a weapon against the consumer society, and they filled the letter columns of papers and magazines with arguments, fuelled by logic, numbers and zeal worthy of a medieval dispute about angels dancing on the head of a pin, over the amount of energy used in cotton shirts, which had to be ironed, versus permanent press ones, which did not but used synthetic fibres, or the environmental benefits of cloth diapers over disposables. Both sides, though, accepted the proposition that individual choice could change the economy and the society, and the movement continued to work from that position. Green guides flourished and environmental magazines put in green living columns, which discussed the ethics and value of daily decisions ranging from canvas grocery bags to airplane travel. Few asked if we could save nature by our participation, however careful, in a system that measured happiness by goods, reduced all values to the single one of money, and saw nature solely as raw material. Even fewer noted that the passions behind green consumerism strongly resembled a perfectionist strain in Christian thought that believed a person could live pure and unspotted by the corruption of the world and Protestants' emphasis on individual salvation. Almost no one worried about how individual action fitted a movement that stressed every human's necessary involvement in the world and the health of the community rather than individual virtue.

Those concerns cast light on environmentalism's search for the good life, now bounded by the impossible ideal of bioregionalism and the limited possibilities of green consumerism and dealing more with the present than a new future. The activist's life laid foundations for a new society, but said nothing about what it would involve, while the green consumer lived within the established order. Bioregionalists had a new life but not one for the masses, for if many people moved to the country they would turn it into suburbia. In *Hope, Human and Wild* Bill McKibben asked what work and rewards an environmental society would offer, what satisfactions we could find in the maple to replace those offered by the mall, and found little help in environmental writings. It may be that environmentalists will have to work out the good life through trial-and-error, but even that requires a clear direction and a standard to judge experiments, something more than platitudes and aspirations. Examining its foundations in faith would, at least, get down to fundamentals.

Close attention to their basic beliefs about humans, the world and humans' ties to nature would allow environmentalists to see how far these clash with American secular orthodoxy, something needed both to speak to most Americans and to work out a consistent standard for the movement. Environmentalists, for instance, cite Aldo Leopold's land ethic often and with reverence and see it as a guide to our policies and even to life, but the land ethic rejected accepted values in very deep ways. The conventional view saw freedom in terms of power to shape the world and society as the creation of autonomous individuals who surrendered some of their freedom for the benefits of association, while the land ethic saw a world where each was tied to all, which made autonomy and freedom in the ordinary sense impossible and probably destructive dreams. It saw the individual as, in some ways, constituted by the system rather than the other way around, and it put the community's health, not the individual's fulfilment, first. Environmentalists need definitions of such core American concepts as freedom, autonomy and self-fulfilment that take account of their beliefs and a view of society and the individual that incorporates ecological realities. By and large, though, they have shied away from these issues, often embraced American orthodoxy to find freedom in wilderness's lack of human restraint and emphasised individual action to save the planet.

Finding new definitions for old terms will not be easy, for American orthodoxy rains down the anathemas of Communism or anti-Americanism on any suggestion that the world lives by interdependence rather than voluntary cooperation, and environmentalists as much as their opponents live within and with American values. Environmentalists, though, need new definitions, for they cannot indefinitely sustain a movement with deep contradictions between principles and (often unconscious) practice, much less work for a society based on interdependence while holding to a view of autonomous individuals. Conventional religious traditions offered ways to think, if not solutions to adopt, for they had balanced the competing claims of individual and community in

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a wide variety of ways over the centuries. Environmentalists, though, find the language and concepts of religion unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and with few exceptions have used only Eastern traditions – far enough outside Western culture that they did not seem ‘religious.’ They ought to overcome this bias, if only for perspective, since they have by default adopted so much of the radical individualism and personal salvation of Protestantism. Politically, the movement has been stalled for the last twenty years and its most visible current debate is over the putative ‘death of environmentalism’. Commitment, enthusiasm, nineteenth-century Romanticism, nostalgia for a vanished wild America and ecology have done all they can. Consciously admitting and carefully examining environmentalism’s roots in secular faiths and conventional religion may be necessary for progress. In any case, it is never a bad thing to know where you stand and what you believe in.

NOTES

¹ James 1994 [1902], pp. 61, 552.

² Carson, p. 261.

³ Leopold 1970 [1949], p. 262.

⁴ Schumacher 1973, p. 49.

⁵ *Environmental History*, 1: 26–46. *Wild Earth*, 6 (Winter 1996–1997). Personal communications with William Cronon.

⁶ Meadows 1991, p. 32.

⁷ Orwell and Angus 1968a, p. 103; 1968b, p. 265.

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