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Author(s): Joel Garreau
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Environmentalism as Religion

Joel Garreau

Traditional religion is having a tough time in parts of the world. Majorities in most European countries have told Gallup pollsters in the last few years that religion does not "occupy an important place" in their lives. Across Europe, Judeo-Christian church attendance is down, as is adherence to religious prohibitions such as those against out-of-wedlock births. And while Americans remain, on average, much more devout than Europeans, there are demographic and regional pockets in this country that resemble Europe in their religious beliefs and practices.

The rejection of traditional religion in these quarters has created a vacuum unlikely to go unfilled; human nature seems to demand a search for order and meaning, and nowadays there is no shortage of options on the menu of belief. Some searchers syncretize Judeo-Christian theology with Eastern or New Age spiritualism. Others seek through science the ultimate answers of our origins, or dream of high-tech transcendence by merging with machines—either approach depending not on rationalism alone but on a faith in the goodness of what rationalism can offer.

For some individuals and societies, the role of religion seems increasingly to be filled by environmentalism. It has become "the religion of choice for urban atheists," according to Michael Crichton, the late science fiction writer (and climate change skeptic). In a widely quoted 2003 speech, Crichton outlined the ways that environmentalism "remaps" Judeo-Christian beliefs:

> There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability. Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment. Just as organic food is its communion, that pesticide-free wafer that the right people with the right beliefs, imbibe.

Joel Garreau *is the author of* Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies—and What it Means to be Human *(Doubleday, 2005); the Lincoln Professor of Law, Culture, and Values at Arizona State University; and a Senior Future Tense Fellow at the New America Foundation. This article was developed during a Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellowship in Science and Religion at the University of Cambridge.*

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In parts of northern Europe, this new faith is now the mainstream. "Denmark and Sweden float along like small, content, durable dinghies of secular life, where most people are nonreligious and don't worship Jesus or Vishnu, don't revere sacred texts, don't pray, and don't give much credence to the essential dogmas of the world's great faiths," observes Phil Zuckerman in his 2008 book *Society without God.* Instead, he writes, these places have become "clean and green." This new faith has very concrete policy implications; the countries where it has the most purchase tend also to have instituted policies that climate activists endorse. To better understand the future of climate policy, we must understand where "ecotheology" has come from and where it is likely to lead.

From Theology to Ecotheology

The German zoologist Ernst Haeckel coined the word "ecology" in the nineteenth century to describe the study of "all those complex mutual relationships" in nature that "Darwin has shown are the conditions of the struggle for existence." Of course, mankind has been closely studying nature since the dawn of time. Stone Age religion aided mankind's first ecological investigation of natural reality, serving as an essential guide for understanding and ordering the environment; it was through story and myth that prehistoric man interpreted the natural world and made sense of it. Survival required knowing how to relate to food species like bison and fish, dangerous predators like bears, and powerful geological forces like volcanoes—and the rise of agriculture required expertise in the seasonal cycles upon which the sustenance of civilization depends.

Our uniquely Western approach to the natural world was shaped fundamentally by Athens and Jerusalem. The ancient Greeks began a systematic philosophical observation of flora and fauna; from their work grew the long study of natural history. Meanwhile, the Judeo-Christian teachings about the natural world begin with the beginning: there is but one God, which means that there is a knowable order to nature; He created man in His image, which gives man an elevated place in that order; and He gave man mastery over the natural world:

> And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth,

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> and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. [Genesis 1:28-29]

In his seminal essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," published in *Science* magazine in 1967, historian Lynn Townsend White, Jr. argues that those Biblical precepts made Christianity, "especially in its Western form," the "most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." In stark contrast to pagan animism, Christianity posited "a dualism of man and nature" and "insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends." Whereas older pagan creeds gave a cyclical account of time, Christianity presumed a teleological direction to history, and with it the possibility of progress. This belief in progress was inherent in modern science, which, wedded to technology, made possible the Industrial Revolution. Thus was the power to control nature achieved by a civilization that had inherited the license to exploit it.

To White, this was not a positive historical development. Writing just a few years after the publication of Rachel Carson's eco-blockbuster *Silent Spring*, White shared in the concern over techno-industrial culture's destruction of nature. Whatever benefit scientific and technological innovation had brought mankind was eclipsed by the "out of control" extraction and processing powers of industrial life and the mechanical degradation of the earth. Christianity, writes White, "bears a huge burden of guilt" for the destruction of the environment.

White believed that science and technology could not solve the ecological problems they had created; our anthropocentric Christian heritage is too deeply ingrained. "Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim." But White was not entirely without hope. Even though "no new set of basic values" will "displace those of Christianity," perhaps Christianity itself can be reconceived. "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious." And so White suggests as a model Saint Francis, "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history." Francis should have been burned as a heretic, White writes, for trying "to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation." Even though Francis failed to turn Christianity toward his vision of radical humility, White argued that something similar to that vision is necessary to save the world in our time.

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White's essay caused a splash, to say the least, becoming the basis for countless conferences, symposia, and debates. One of the most serious critiques of White's thesis appears in theologian Richard John Neuhaus's 1971 book *In Defense of People*, a broad indictment of the rise of the mellifluous "theology of ecology." Neuhaus argues that our framework of human rights is built upon the Christian understanding of man's relationship to nature. Overturning the latter, as White hoped would happen, will bring the former crashing down. And Neuhaus makes the case that White misunderstands his own nominee for an ecological patron saint:

> What is underemphasized by White and others, and what was so impressive in Francis, is the unremitting focus on the glory of the Creator. Francis' line of accountability drove straight to the Father and not to Mother Nature. Francis was accountable *for* nature but *to* God. Francis is almost everyone's favorite saint and the gentle compassion of his encompassing vision is, viewed selectively, susceptible to almost any argument or mood.... It was not the claims of creation but the claims of the Creator that seized Francis.

Other Christian writers joined Neuhaus in condemning the eco-movement's attempt to subvert or supplant their religion. "We too want to clean up pollution in nature," *Christianity Today* demurred, "but not by polluting men's souls with a revived paganism." The Jesuit magazine *America* called environmentalism "an American heresy." The theologian Thomas Sieger Derr lamented "an expressed preference for the preservation of nonhuman nature against human needs wherever it is necessary to choose." (Stephen R. Fox recounts these responses in his 1981 book *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement.*)

The Greening of Christianity

From today's vantage, it seems that White's counsel has been heeded far and wide. Ecotheologies loosely based on concepts lifted from Hinduism or Buddhism have become popular in some Baby Boomer circles. Neo-pagans cheerfully accept the "tree-hugger" designation and say they were born "green." And, most strikingly, Christianity has begun to accept environmentalism. Theologians now speak routinely of "stewardship"—a doctrine of human responsibility for the natural world that unites interpretations of Biblical passages with contemporary teachings about social justice.

In November 1979, a dozen years after White's essay, Pope John Paul II formally designated Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecologists.

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Over the following two decades, John Paul repeatedly addressed in passionate terms the moral obligation "to care for all of Creation" and argued that "respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of Creation, which is called to join man in praising God." His successor, Benedict XVI, has also spoken about the environment, albeit less stirringly. "That very ordinariness," argues a correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, "seems remarkable. Benedict simply took for granted that his audience would recognize the environment as an object of legitimate Christian interest. What the matter-of-fact tone reveals, in other words, is the extent to which Catholicism has 'gone green.'"

American Protestantism, too, has gone green. Numerous congregations are constructing "green churches"—choosing to glorify God not by erecting soaring sanctuaries but by building more energy-efficient houses of worship. In some denominations, programs for recycling or carpooling seem as common as food drives. Church-sponsored Earth Day celebrations are widespread.

Even some evangelicals are turning toward environmentalism. Luis E. Lugo, the director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, speaks of their "broader environmental sensitivity":

> Once it's translated into Biblical terms, [evangelicals] pick up the environmental banner using phrases that resonate with the community—"Creation care." That immediately puts it in an evangelical context rather than the empirical arguments about the environment. "This is the world God created. God gave you a mandate to care for this world." It's a very direct religious appeal.

That said, the widely reported "greening of evangelicals" shouldn't be exaggerated. Conservative evangelical leaders remain wary of environmentalism's agenda and of any attacks on industrial prowess that could be seen as undermining American national greatness. Many evangelicals are rankled by environmentalists' critique of the Genesis depiction of man's place in the natural order. And evangelicals are alert to any hint of pagan worship. Moreover, the available poll data—admittedly rather sparse—paints a mixed picture. In a 2008 survey conducted by the Barna Group, a California-based public opinion firm that concentrates on church issues, 90 percent of the evangelical respondents said they "would like Christians to take a more active role in caring for creation" (with two thirds saying they strongly agreed with that sentiment). But the term "Creation care" had not sunk in (89 percent of the respondents who identified themselves as Christian said they had never heard of it).

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And both the Barna survey and another 2008 survey conducted by Pew found that evangelicals tend to be much more skeptical about the reality of global warming than other American Christians or the population at large.

To the extent that evangelicals and environmentalists are in fact reaching out to one another, there can be benefits for each side. For churches with aging congregations, green issues reportedly help attract new, younger members to the pews. And what do environmental activists hope to gain by recruiting churches to their cause? "Foot soldiers, is the short answer," says Lugo.

Carbon Calvinism

Beyond influencing—one might even say colonizing—Christianity, the ecological movement can increasingly be seen as something of a religion in and of itself. It is "quasi-religious in character," says Lugo. "It generates its own set of moral values."

Freeman Dyson, the brilliant and contrarian octogenarian physicist, agrees. In a 2008 essay in the *New York Review of Books*, he described environmentalism as "a worldwide secular religion" that has "replaced socialism as the leading secular religion." This religion holds "that we are stewards of the earth, that despoiling the planet with waste products of our luxurious living is a sin, and that the path of righteousness is to live as frugally as possible." The ethics of this new religion, he continued,

> are being taught to children in kindergartens, schools, and colleges all over the world....And the ethics of environmentalism are fundamentally sound. Scientists and economists can agree with Buddhist monks and Christian activists that ruthless destruction of natural habitats is evil and careful preservation of birds and butterflies is good. The worldwide community of environmentalists—most of whom are not scientists—holds the moral high ground, and is guiding human societies toward a hopeful future. Environmentalism, as a religion of hope and respect for nature, is here to stay. This is a religion that we can all share, whether or not we believe that global warming is harmful.

Describing environmentalism as a religion is not equivalent to saying that global warming is not real. Indeed, the evidence for it is overwhelming, and there are powerful reasons to believe that humans are causing it. But no matter its empirical basis, environmentalism is progressively taking the social form of a religion and fulfilling some of the individual needs associated with religion, with major political and policy implications.

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William James, the pioneering psychologist and philosopher, defined religion as a belief that the world has an unseen order, coupled with the desire to live in harmony with that order. In his 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James pointed to the value of a community of shared beliefs and practices. He also appreciated the individual quest for spirituality—a search for meaning through encounters with the world. More recently, the late analytic philosopher William P. Alston outlined in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* what he considered the essential characteristics of religions. They include a distinction between sacred and profane objects; ritual acts focused upon sacred objects; a moral code; feelings of awe, mystery, and guilt; adoration in the presence of sacred objects and during rituals; a worldview that includes a notion of where the individual fits; and a cohesive social group of the likeminded.

Environmentalism lines up pretty readily with both of those accounts of religion. As climate change literally transforms the heavens above us, faith-based environmentalism increasingly sports saints, sins, prophets, predictions, heretics, demons, sacraments, and rituals. Chief among its holy men is Al Gore—who, according to his supporters, was crucified in the 2000 election, then rose from the political dead and ascended to heaven twice—not only as a Nobel deity, but an Academy Awards angel. He speaks of "Creation care" and cites the Bible in hopes of appealing to evangelicals.

Selling indulgences is out of fashion these days. But you can now assuage your guilt by buying carbon offsets. Fire and brimstone, too, are much in vogue—accompanied by an unmistakable whiff of authoritarianism: "A professor writing in the *Medical Journal of Australia* calls on the Australian government to impose a carbon charge of $5,000 on every birth, annual carbon fees of $800 per child and provide a carbon credit for sterilization," writes Braden R. Allenby, an Arizona State University professor of environmental engineering, ethics, and law. An "article in the *New Scientist* suggests that the problem with obesity is the additional carbon load it imposes on the environment; others that a major social cost of divorce is the additional carbon burden resulting from splitting up families." Allenby, writing in a 2008 article on GreenBiz.com, continues:

> A recent study from the Swedish Ministry of Sustainable Development argues that males have a disproportionately larger impact on global warming ("women cause considerably fewer carbon dioxide emissions than men and thus considerably less climate change"). The chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that those

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> who suggest that climate change is not a catastrophic challenge are no different than Hitler.... E. O. Wilson calls such people parasites. *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman writes that "global warming deniers are now on a par with Holocaust deniers."

The sheer volume of vicious language employed to recast social and cultural trends in terms of their carbon footprint suggests the rise of what Allenby calls a dangerous new "carbon fundamentalism."

Some observers detect parallels between the ecological movement and the medieval Church. "One could see Greenpeacers as crusaders, with the industrialist cast as the infidel," writes Richard North in *New Scientist.* That may be a stretch, but it does seem that this new religion has its share of excommunicated heretics. For example, since daring to challenge environmentalist orthodoxy, Freeman Dyson has discovered himself variously described as "a pompous twit," "a blowhard," "a cesspool of misinformation," and "an old coot riding into the sunset." For his part, Dyson remains cheerily unrepentant. "We are lucky that we can be heretics today without any danger of being burned at the stake," he has said. "But unfortunately I am an old heretic.... What the world needs is young heretics."

Many of those making the case that environmentalism has become a religion throw around the word "religion" as a pejorative. This disdain is rooted in an uncontroversial proposition: You cannot reason your way to faith. That's the idea behind the "leap of faith"—or the leap *to* faith, in Kierkegaard's original formulation: the act of believing in something without, or in spite of, empirical evidence. Kierkegaard argued that if we choose faith, we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason.

So those on the right side of the political spectrum who portray environmentalism as a religion do so because, if faith is inherently not achievable through rationality, and if environmentalism is a religion, then environmentalism is utterly irrational and must be discredited and ignored. That is the essence of Michael Crichton's 2003 speech. "Increasingly," he said, "it seems facts aren't necessary, because the tenets of environmentalism are all about belief." Environmentalism, he argued, has become totally divorced from science. "It's about whether you are going to be a sinner, or saved. Whether you are going to be one of the people on the side of salvation, or on the side of doom. Whether you are going to be one of us, or one of them."

A similar attack from the right comes from Ray Evans, an Australian businessman, politician, and global-warming skeptic:

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> Almost all of the attacks on the mining industry being generated by the environmentalist movement [in the 1990s] were coming out of Northern Europe and Scandinavia, and it didn't take me long to work out that we were dealing with religious belief, that the elites of Northern Europe and Scandinavia—the political elites, the intellectual elites, even the business elites—were, in fact, believers in one brand of environmentalism or another and regardless of the facts. Some of the most bizarre policies were coming out of these countries with respect to metals. I found myself having to find out—"Why is this so?"—because on the face of it they were insane, but they were very strongly held and you'd have to say that when people hold onto beliefs regarding the natural world, and hold onto them regardless of any evidence to the contrary, then you're dealing with religion, you're not dealing with science....
>
> Secondly, it fulfills a religious need. They need to believe in sin, so that means sin is equal to pollution. They need to believe in salvation. Well, sustainable development is salvation. They need to believe in a mankind that needs redemption, so you get redemption by stopping using carbon fuels like coal and oil and so on. So, it fulfills a religious need and a political need, which is why they hold onto it so tenaciously, despite all the evidence that the whole thing is nonsense.

Leftists also sometimes disparage environmentalism as religion. In their case, the main objection is usually pragmatic: rationalism effects change and religion doesn't. So, for instance, the Sixties radical Murray Bookchin saw the way environmentalism was hooking up with New Age spirituality as pathetic. "The real cancer that afflicts the planet is capitalism and hierarchy," he wrote. "I don't think we can count on prayers, rituals, and good vibes to remove this cancer. I think we have to fight it *actively* and *with all the power we have.*" Bookchin, a self-described revolutionary, dismissed green spirituality as "flaky." He said that his own brand of "social ecology," by contrast, "does not fall back on incantations, sturas, flow diagrams or spiritual vagaries. It is avowedly *rational.* It does not try to regale metaphorical forms of spiritual mechanism and crude biologisms with Taoist, Buddhist, Christian, or shamanistic 'Eco-la-la.'"

The Prophet and the Heretic

In the 1960s, a British chemist working with the American space program had a flash of insight. Planet Earth, James Lovelock realized, behaves like one complex, living system of which we humans are, in effect, some of its parts. The physical components of the earth, from its atmosphere to

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its oceans, closely integrate with all of its living organisms to maintain climatic chemistry in a self-regulating balance ideal for the maintenance and propagation of life.

His idea turned out to have scientific value. However, Lovelock would probably just be a footnote in scientific history instead of the much-decorated intellectual celebrity he is, except for one thing: He named this vast planetary organism after the Greek goddess who personified the earth—Gaia—and described "Her" as "alive."

Not only was his Gaia Hypothesis predictably controversial in the world of science—as befits a radical rethinking of earth's complex biosphere—but it was both revered and reviled by those who saw it as fitting in perfectly with tie-dyed New Age spirituality. This was true even though he describes his time at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena as one in which "not all of us were hippies with our rock chicks." For both good and ill, Lovelock not only gave the planet a persona, he created one for himself, becoming "the closest thing we have to an Old Testament prophet, though his deity is not Jehovah but Gaia," as the *Sunday Times* recently noted.

Even though Lovelock continues to go to great lengths to be an empiricist, his 2009 book *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*—published in the year he celebrated his ninetieth birthday—has been reviewed as a prophet's wrathful jeremiad of planetary doom, studded with parables of possible salvation for the few.

Being embraced by the spiritual left has brought Lovelock fame and attention. Yet it's a marvel the challenges Lovelock has created for himself in changing the minds of zealots. In *Vanishing Face*, for example, Lovelock, ever the scientist, open-mindedly considers the possibilities for last-ditch humans fighting global warming by intentionally reengineering the planet. One idea he discusses is retrofitting every commercial airliner on earth to allow them, as they fly, each to spray a ton or two of sulfuric acid into the stratosphere every day for the foreseeable future. The notion is that this will create molecules that will cause solar energy to be reflected back into space, replacing the reflectivity of the melting polar ice caps.

So, you say to Lovelock: You've succeeded in getting out this idea that the planet is a living organism. An awful lot of people are totally convinced by your hypothesis, and even view you as a prophet. How would you begin to sell this idea of injecting sulfuric acid into a living being that some view in religious terms?

"Yes, especially when you think about the role of the element sulfur in old theology," Lovelock replies. "The devil—the scent of sulfur reveals his

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presence. I hear what you're saying very clearly. I've never had to sell it to religious greens so far. I don't look forward to the job."

Of environmentalism increasingly being faith-based, Lovelock says, "I would agree with you wholeheartedly. I look at humans as probably having an evolutionary desire to have ideology, to justify their actions. Green thinking is like Christian or Muslim religions—it's another ideology."

In terms of saving Gaia, do you view carbon Calvinism as a net plus or a net minus?

"A net minus. You often hear environmentalists saying that one should do this or the other thing—like not fly—because not doing it can save the planet. It's sheer hubris to imagine we can save Gaia. It's quite beyond our capacity. What we have to do is save ourselves. That's really important. Gaia would like it."

Gaia would like it?

"Yes. I've got to be very careful here, because I get misinterpreted badly. I'm not making out Gaia to be a sentient entity and that sort of thing. It's really metaphoric. So having said that—"

Gaia would think it important for us to save ourselves?

"Exactly. Our evolution of intelligence is something of immense value to the planet. It could make, eventually, part of it, an intelligent planet. More able to deal with problems like incoming asteroids, volcanic outbursts and so on. So I look on us as highly beneficial and therefore certainly worth saving."

The good news about religious greens, Lovelock says, is that they can be led. Saints like him can change minds. "I have a personal experience here. Something like five years ago in Britain they did a big poll. There was hardly anybody" in favor of nuclear power. Now—thanks in no small part to Lovelock's lobbying, at least in his own account—the great majority of Britons favor nuclear energy.

Lovelock's faith in democracy is shared by Bjørn Lomborg. He believes that people want to do good, and if you approach them on that basis, you can get them to listen to reason. Lomborg is the Danish author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (published in English in 2001), and the director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center. He has been pilloried for opposing the Kyoto Protocol and other measures to cut carbon emissions in the short term because of the evidence he sees that they don't achieve their goals. Instead, he argues that we should adapt to inevitable short-term temperature rises and spend money on research and development for longer-term environmental solutions, as well as other pressing world crises such as malaria, AIDS, and hunger. He argues, for example, that

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getting Vitamin A and zinc to 80 percent of the 140 million children in the developing world who lack them is a higher priority than cutting carbon emissions. The cost, he argues, would be $60 million per year, yielding health and cognitive development benefits of over $1 billion.

Despite his heresy, Lomborg thinks empiricism can prevail over faith. He believes that, in a democracy, if you keep calmly and rationally and sympathetically making your case, the great majority can come to think you are making more sense than the true believers. "My sense is that most people do want to do good," he says.

> They don't just want to pay homage to whatever god or whatever religion is the flavor of the year. They actually want to see concrete results that will leave this planet a better place for the future. So I try to engage them in a rational manner rather than in the religious manner. Of course, if people's minds are entirely made up there is nothing you can do to change it. But my sense is that most people are not in that direction. My sense is that in virtually any area, you have probably 10 percent true believers that you just cannot reach. And probably also 10 percent who just disparage it and don't give a hoot about it. But the 80 percent are people who are busy living their lives, loving their kids, and making other plans. And I think those are the 80 percent you want to reach.

So why do so many people want to burn you at the stake?

> Oh sure. Certainly a lot of the high priests have been after me. But I take that as a compliment. It simply means that my argument is a lot more dangerous. If I was just a crazy guy ranting outside the religious gathering, then it might not matter. But I'm the guy who says, maybe you could do smarter. Maybe you could be more rational. Maybe you could spend your money in a better way.
>
> A lot of people have been after me with totally disproportionate behavior if this were really a discussion on facts. But I continuously try to make this an argument about rationality. Because when you do that, and your opponents perhaps exaggerate, and go beyond the rational argument, it shows up in the conversation. Most people would start saying, "Wow, that's weird, that they'd go this far."
>
> This is not to deny that global warming is also a serious problem. But then again I ask: why is it that we tackle it only in the way that current dogma talks about—cut carbon emissions right now and feel good about yourself? Instead of focusing on making new innovations that would [allow everyone] to cut carbon emissions in the long run much cheaper, more effectively, and with much greater chance of success.

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> When you make those double arguments, I think the 80 percent we've talked about start saying, "That guy makes a lot of sense. Why are the other people continuously almost frothing around the mouth?" And always saying, "No, no, no, it has to be cut carbon emissions and that has to be the biggest problem in the world."
>
> I think that's the way to counter much of this discussion. It's not about getting your foot into the religious camp as well. It's simply to stand firmly on the rational side and keep saying, "but I *know* you want to do good in the world."

Lovelock and Lomberg, prophet and heretic, honored and reviled, one hoping for action today and the other expecting solutions tomorrow—yet each professes confidence in an eventual democratic endorsement of his plan. Talk about a leap of faith.

The New Religion and Policy

The two faces of religious environmentalism—the greening of mainstream religion and the rise of carbon Calvinism—may each transform the political and policy debate over climate change. In the former case, the growing Christian interest in stewardship could destabilize the political divide that has long characterized the culture wars. Although the pull of social issues has made the right seem like a natural home for evangelicals, a commitment to environmentalism might lead them to align themselves more with the left. Even if no major realignment takes place, the bond between evangelicals and the right might be loosened somewhat. (And beyond politics, other longstanding positions may be shaken up. Activists and scientists who long pooh-poohed evangelicals because of their views on evolution or the life questions will have to get accustomed to working with the new environmental "foot soldiers," and vice versa.)

A deeper concern is the expansion of irrationalism in the making of public policy. Of course, no policy debate can ever be reduced to matters of pure reason; there will always be fundamentally clashing values and visions that cannot be settled by rationality alone. But the rhetoric of many environmentalists is more than just a working out of those fundamental differences. The language of the carbon fundamentalists "indicates a shift from [seeking to help] the public and policymakers understand a complex issue, to demonizing disagreement," as Braden Allenby has written. "The data-driven and exploratory processes of science are choked off by inculcation of belief systems that rely on archetypal and emotive strength....

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The authority of science is relied on not for factual enlightenment but as ideological foundation for authoritarian policy."

There is nothing unusual about human beings taking more than one path in their search for truth—science at the same time as religion, for example. Nor is there anything unusual about making public policy without sufficient data. We do it all the time; the world sometimes demands it.

The good news about making public policy in alliance with faith is that it can provoke a certain beneficial zeal. People tend to be more deeply moved by faith than by reason alone, and so faith can be very effective in bringing about necessary change—as evidenced by the civil rights movement, among others.

The bad news is that the empirical approach arose in no small part to mitigate the dangers of zeal—to keep blood from flowing in the streets. A strict focus on fact and reason whenever possible can avert error and excess in policy. But can someone who has made a faith of environmentalism—whose worldview and lifestyle have been utterly shaped by it—adapt to changing facts? For the one fact we reliably know about the future of the planet's climate is that the facts will change. It is simply too complex to be comprehensively and accurately modeled. As climatologist Gavin Schmidt jokes, there is a simple way to produce a perfect model of our climate that will predict the weather with 100 percent accuracy: first, start with a universe that is exactly like ours; then wait 14 billion years.

So what happens if, say, we discover that it is not possible to return the environment to the conditions we desire, as James Lovelock expects? What happens if evidence accumulates that we should address climate change with methods that the carbon Calvinists don't approve of? To what extent, if any, would devotees of the "natural" accept reengineering the planet? How long will it take, if ever, for nuclear power to be accepted as green?

In the years ahead, we will see whether the supposedly scientific debates over the environment can really be conducted by fact and reason alone, or whether necessary change, whatever that may turn out be, will require some new Reformation. For if environmental matters really have become matters of faith—if environmentalism has become a new front in the longstanding culture wars—then what place is left for the crucial function of pragmatic, democratic decision-making?

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