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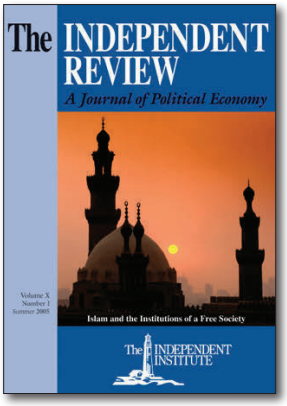

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Economics and Environmentalism

Belief Systems at Odds

Robert H. Nelson

Economics and environmentalism are belief systems that shape their adherents' way of thinking about the world. We might just as accurately characterize them as secular religions, which most theologians count as real religions (see, for example, Tillich 1963), but many people prefer to regard them as competing belief systems. Many (not all) economists and environmentalists thus function in the world as advocates for their belief systems and associated values, albeit often more implicitly than explicitly (Nelson 1991, 2001, 2010).

This view admittedly is not the usual understanding of the social sciences and ecological science, which have long professed to seek "value neutrality." Depending on the audience, however, people often agree to a surprising extent that economics and environmentalism are actually religions. When the subject comes up informally in conversations with economists (and with policy analysts, if perhaps less predictably), I find little disagreement with the idea that environmentalism is a religion—to most economists, the claim seems fairly obvious. Environmentalists often react similarly, but the other way around: economics, for most environmentalists, is a religion. Neither group, however, is comfortable with the characterization of their own thinking as religious (and the economists are more uncomfortable with it than the environmentalists).

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Economics and environmentalism are not always religious. Economics can be turned into a pure exercise of mathematical or other formalism; other things being equal, it is not a religious statement to say that having more goods and services is better than having fewer. Likewise, other things being equal, having less risk of cancer is better than having greater risk. The religious dimension becomes much clearer, however, where economics and environmentalism intersect with public policymaking. Here most people's policy positions reflect in significant part the core convictions of economic religion and environmental religion. Economists and environmentalists obviously can also have supplemental noneconomic and nonenvironmental beliefs about strictly private aspects of life or matters such as life after death.

Economic Religion

Economists believe in economic progress as an end in itself. Or, more accurately, they view economic progress not as the ultimate end, but as the correct path to the ultimate end: elimination of material deprivation as an important aspect of human existence, freeing human beings to realize their higher and better selves. As in many other areas, John Maynard Keynes was more articulate about this idea than other economists. In 1930, in an essay titled "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," Keynes wrote that rapid economic growth will soon "lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight" as a result of "the greatest change that has ever occurred in the material environment for human beings in the aggregate." Thus relieved of the pressures of economic scarcity, we will finally be "able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us" throughout all previous human history (1963, 371–72).

Enthusiasm for economic progress reached its apex at the end of the nineteenth century, and in the years leading up to World War I many in the West believed that economic progress was paving the path to a new heaven on earth. Richard Ely, who helped to found the American Economic Association in 1885, believed that economics would provide the scientific knowledge to sustain "a never-ceasing attack on every wrong institution, until the earth becomes a new earth, and all its cities, cities of God" (1889, 73). Historians have described the Progressive movement of those years as seeking to advance a "gospel of efficiency," amounting to a "secular Great Awakening" (Haber 1964, ix). Leading political scientist Dwight Waldo once wrote that "it is yet amazing what a position of dominance 'efficiency' assumed [in the Progressive Era], how it waxed until it had assimilated or over-shadowed other values, how men and events came to be degraded or exalted according to its dictate" ([1948] 1984, 19–20).

The carnage of World War I shattered this faith for many leading Western intellectuals, and the many terrible events of the 1930s and World War II proved even more disillusioning. Nevertheless, economists have been perhaps the leading holdouts for the belief in progress (Friedman 2005), even if they no longer speak with the religious zeal of the Progressives and adopt a posture of rigorous analytical neutrality.

William Baumol, when asked why he entered the economics profession, replied: "I believe deeply with Shaw, that there are few crimes more heinous than poverty. Shaw as usual, exaggerated when he told us that money is the root of all evil, but he did not exaggerate by much" (1992, 51). In advising professional economists on the role they should play in government, Charles Schultze said that they should be "partisan efficiency advocates," advancing the highest cause of the economist—the efficient use of the resources of society (1982, 62).

In the nineteenth century, the belief that economic progress was transforming the human condition for the better rested on seemingly solid ground, and it was apparently reasonable—at least until World War I—to think that this progress might continue indefinitely, leading eventually (perhaps in a mere one hundred years or so, Keynes optimistically surmised) to a virtual heaven on earth. Economic historian Gregory Clark reports that no large improvement in the living standards of the great majority of the people living in England occurred before 1800. Indeed, for the world as a whole, "the average person in . . . 1800 was no better off than the average person of 100,000 BC" (2007, 195). Not until the nineteenth and twentieth century did humankind encounter "the first break of human society from the constraints of nature, the first break of the human economy from the natural economy" (Clark 2007, 33), when large numbers of people first overcame the state of material deprivation that had always characterized life for the great majority. An average person today lives better materially than a member of a royal family did a few hundred years ago. This tremendous, unprecedented change does seem miraculous.

Although many current economists agree fundamentally with these observations, they would argue that economics long ago shed its progressive religious zeal and now rests on analysis in which they merely assume that more is better than less. Utility depends on goods and services consumed, and more of each good and service necessarily means a higher level of utility for each individual so favored. Distributional issues will obviously arise, but if they are dealt with reasonably, society's total welfare will increase as the total amount of goods and services it consumes increases. More rapid growth means more rapid increase in social welfare.

Implicit in this way of thinking, however, are strong unstated value assumptions. First, it assumes that human happiness and well-being depend on consumption. Many leading religious thinkers in the history of Western civilization have believed, to the contrary, that labor is the key to human happiness. Having more possessions for consumption may pose great dangers in at least two ways: first, focusing on the pursuit of riches may tempt us to betray our higher principles; and, second, the possession of the wealth itself may corrupt our morals. This fear is no minor matter, but a central message in the history of Christianity. The Bible warns, "[W]oe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:24); "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23); and "Love your enemies, . . . lend to them without getting anything back" (Luke 6:35). The poor are the blessed of the earth.

The economist Donald Hay is somewhat unusual in being both well regarded in the economics profession and a devout Christian. He observes that the idea of the pursuit of self-interest fits well in the Christian concept of fallen human beings. Although he thinks that much of what economists currently do would survive in a newly "Christian economics," he asserts that the central "emphasis on 'efficiency, growth and progress,' as defined in the neo-classical research program, is missing from the list" of acceptable Christian purposes of the economic system. This absence is owing "to the contrast between the biblical framework and the normative framework of economics with its utilitarian roots" (1989, 124). Maximum happiness is not the Christian idea of the highest end of life; economic growth becomes a false god for economists.

My concern here is not the validity of Christian teachings, but the fact that if economics by its very framework of thought is significantly antagonistic to at least some core Christian values, then it is impossible to argue that economics is value free. Indeed, it takes a religion to stand in opposition to the teachings of another religion. Economics, therefore, must be an opposing religion, if of a secular kind.

In Calvinism, in particular, human existence in this world since the fall in the Garden is deeply sinful—indeed, "totally depraved," according to John Calvin's own writings. Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest Calvinist, preached in his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" that "your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell" (1998, 26). The pursuit of more leisure and consumption will only make matters worse; hard work is at least a possible remedy for our unruly souls. If the core Calvinist worldview had informed the development of economics, the whole set of initial assumptions of economic analysis would have had to be radically altered. Economics, however, implicitly dismissed such Calvinist ways of thinking as a throwback to a less enlightened past and instead embodied modern Progressive values in its founding assumptions. By treating these assumptions as foundational and universally true, economics was implicitly preaching its own religious view of the human condition.

The course of economic progress involves the radical transformation of a society. What is less efficient must be routinely cast aside in favor of what is more efficient. The market is the most effective instrument of progress because it makes these decisions the most ruthlessly, without political or other social constraints. Therefore, most economists today, having seen that socialism actually exerts a conservative force by allowing politics to block the rapid pace of change necessary for maximum progress, strongly favor market organization of the economy. But what if the very processes of social transformation themselves involve large costs that at some point conceivably become greater than the benefits of progress? Perhaps material progress, like ordinary consumer goods and contrary to economic religion, is subject to diminishing returns. Might we have reached this point already in the most developed countries, such as the United States? I am not making this argument, but it certainly lies within the realm of possibility. Economists, however, following their faith in

progress, implicitly dismiss it. They generally make no effort to demonstrate the contrary scientifically.

Consider trade with China, which has no doubt worked to maximize total available goods and services in the United States, helping the poor above all owing to the low prices at places such as Wal-Mart, and which has produced large material benefits for the poor in China. It has also thrown millions of workers in the United States out of their jobs, caused thousands of businesses to close their doors, and undermined the vitality of many U.S. communities. How can we know for sure that the social gains for the United States from much greater trade with China are greater than the social costs? Economists are actually not very interested in this question; they simply assume implicitly (take on faith) that worldwide economic progress is the point of the economic system. They are correct, moreover, in concluding that a worldwide free market will most effectively advance this objective.

Few if any economists have ever sought to carry out a truly comprehensive benefit–cost analysis of trade with China from the U.S. point of view alone. Against the benefits have been large costs, including the psychic demoralization of U.S. workers thrown out of jobs and the failure of U.S. businesspersons, as well as the transitional costs (conventionally monetary and, again, also in significant part psychic) entailed when workers have to move to another job in another community and otherwise reconstruct their lives. Many people displaced by "progress" never recover their past level of "utility." If economists were to factor in all the costs in every dimension of life associated with rapid gains in economic efficiency and thus with "progress," they would not be able to say objectively whether the gains are today worth the costs (it is admittedly easy enough to say that the gains of the past burdens of progress borne by others in the nineteenth and twentieth century are worth it for us now). Yet without reservation economists routinely advocate efficiency-enhancing measures of public policy, such as trade with China. This advocacy is not "scientific"; it requires a faith in the transformative benefits of economic progress. We can ignore the many social costs of rapid economic change because the ultimate goal is a transcendent one, not subject to ordinary benefit–cost calculations. Progress, after all, is leading us to the salvation of the world.

Some economists have taken up study of "the environment," creating the new field of environmental economics. I exclude this group, however, in the discussion on the environmentalists' beliefs to follow. Most environmental economists remain believers in economic religion as they try to introduce greater consideration of nonmarket environmental factors into the main body of economic thought and analysis. Their goal is to advance the cause of progress with improved economic science.

Environmental Religion

Environmental religion arose in significant part as a backlash against economic religion and its powerful faith in progress (Nelson 1990, 2004). One environmental philosopher went so far as to write an article in the well-respected professional journal

Environmental Ethics titled "Why Environmentalists Hate Mainstream Economists" (Norton 1991). It was not the only such backlash. In the twentieth century, the doctrines of the mainstream Protestant denominations were thoroughly infused with modern, progressive themes. To the surprise of these denominations, which had assumed that they were part of the vanguard of religion, they steadily lost out in the latter part of the twentieth century to evangelical and fundamentalist branches of Christianity and even to Pentecostal faiths, some of whose practices ("speaking in tongues") seemed virtually incomprehensible by modern rational standards.

It is perhaps not so surprising that progressive economic religion has faced a crisis of faith. As mentioned previously, the world of the first half of the twentieth century suffered some severe blows. One can admit that modern conditions of life are obviously far better materially than those in previous human history. For example, life expectancy at birth has risen from approximately thirty years to more than seventy years in the developed world. Despite the great material advances, however, economic religion could not realize the utopian hopes that characterized Progressive thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In some ways, it had been naive to think that a whole new condition of human life, including moral and spiritual gains, would soon arrive on earth owing to material developments. Progressive economic religion belonged to the millenarian tradition of Christianity that, though expressed in much different ways in the modern age, is seemingly as strong as ever (Marxism being the clearest example). But Christian hopes for imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth and now secular progressive hopes of a related character have always been frustrated historically.

At one level, environmentalism has simply spoken up for all the losers, human and nonhuman, in the headlong pursuit of rapid economic change—the march of progress (Gottlieb 2006). When the losers are humans, the resistance to change is often described as a form of NIMBYism ("not in my backyard"). For environmentalists, it is no longer enough simply to argue that a new power plant or highway is necessary at a particular location because it represents economic progress (Ackerman and Heinzerling 2004). For one thing, they argue, many individuals might experience losses as a result of such actions, even though society as a whole might significantly benefit. Environmentalists are saying, in effect, Why should these losers be willing to sacrifice their own best interests voluntarily? Moreover, even in regard to society as a whole, environmentalists demand that the full social benefits of progress be weighed against the full social costs (including those typically ignored by economists) in each specific case. Going forward should not be a matter simply of demonstrating once again a strong commitment to a religious faith in progress.

Economists have long advocated benefit–cost analyses, but they have always been selective in what they count as a benefit and a cost. The psychic losses associated with the demolition of an old building that detracts from the "historical character" of an area, for example, are almost never considered in the social cost calculus (though the new building clearly counts on the social benefit side). All the various psychic

costs of rapid social change itself (most people are risk averse and do not like such change) have been ruled out as legitimate costs for most economic calculations. The large human importance of belonging to a "community" is almost impossible to factor in to benefit–cost calculations, even though it is one of the most important elements of the human experience.

Environmentalists have been most critical of the results of "progress" and its economist defenders with regard to nonhumans (Dunlap 2004). J. R. McNeil, professor of history at Georgetown University and author of *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, writes that "communism aspired to become the universal creed of the twentieth century but a more flexible and seductive religion succeeded where communism failed: the quest for economic growth. Capitalists, nationalists—indeed almost everyone, communists included—worshipped at this same alter" (2000, 334). Ignoring the many down sides, the idea of economic progress "continued to legitimate, and indeed indirectly to cause, massive and rapid ecological change" to the great detriment of the nonhuman creatures of the earth (336). For some plant and animal species, it meant their complete extinction, a veritable nonhuman "genocide" according to some environmentalists.

Environmentalism might be described as a new, secular form of "Calvinism minus God" (Nelson 1998). Rather than celebrating more goods and services, environmentalism's rituals typically celebrate less consumption—lower the heat, drive fewer miles, use less water, live in smaller houses, have fewer children, and so forth—as a matter of religious principle, not of maximizing utility in any practical sense. Recycling, rather than being simply a more efficient way to get rid of solid waste, has become another religious ritual for environmental religion, in some ways analogous to eating kosher food in Judaism. Making a genuine sacrifice as a way of demonstrating a deep commitment to the faith is common to many religions. One statement of environmental principles is revealingly titled *Muddling toward Frugality* (Johnson 1978).

The old Calvinist sense of human beings as corrupted and depraved creatures on the earth has been revived among some leading environmental figures of our time. David Brower, who was for many years the executive director of the Sierra Club in the 1950s and 1960s, spoke regularly in his "sermons" of the human presence as a "cancer" of the earth. Just as cancer cells grow uncontrollably until they destroy their human host, so exploding human populations are now destroying the whole earth (qtd. in McPhee 1971, 83). The clear implication (which Brower did not draw out explicitly) is that the earth would be better off without any human beings. A small recent branch of "utopian" environmental literature dreams of an earth without human beings (Weisman 2007).

In economic religion, nature is seen as a "natural resource," providing the food, wood, metals, and other material foundations for a rapidly growing economy. In environmental religion, by contrast, nature is seen as something to be protected from the adverse impacts of human actions. Calvin once wrote that in nature a good Christian can encounter the direct handiwork of God (put in place at the Creation),

thus opening a mirror into the mind of God, stimulating powerful feelings of religious awe and wonder. Environmentalists today see the experience of wild nature in similar terms. For them, a person can go into nature to feel a powerful sense of spiritual inspiration—another aspect of "environmental Calvinism" (Nelson 1993). Such thinking helps to explain why we have to go to such lengths to protect wild nature: we are protecting a critical surviving avenue of access to the divine. Again, this view is altogether outside a utilitarian or economic religion framework of thought.

The cathedrals of economic religion were power plants, superhighways, space travel, and giant dams such as Hoover and Grand Coulee. Progressive pilgrims traveled to feel inspired by such dams, which symbolized the new human power to control nature for human betterment and ultimately for the creation of a whole new human condition on earth. For environmentalists, in contrast, dams are a desecration of nature; their new cathedrals are wilderness areas, which symbolize the opposite set of values (Oelschlaeger 1991). The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines a wilderness as an area "untrammeled by man." In place of good and evil in Christianity, economic religion substituted what is "efficient" or "inefficient" (efficiency being the operative measure of progress and thus of movement along the path toward economic salvation). In environmental religion, the new ethical standard instead pertains to "natural" and "unnatural." Environmentalists today advance a host of "green values" that serve to provide overall guidance for "green living." In virtually every case, something "green" is something intended to reduce the human impact on the earth, serving the transcendent cause of making it a more "natural" environment, a place less corrupted by human impacts (Taylor 2010).

Implications for Economists and Policy Analysts

For purposes of discussion, let us now simply assume—broadly, at least, if not in every detail—that the beliefs in economic progress (with economists being the leading priesthood) and in environmentalism are modern secular religions and that their policy disagreements are fundamentally of a religious character (Nelson 2010). Economic religion was the most powerful religion of any kind in the twentieth century, although environmental religion increasingly challenged it in the last third of the century.

This development certainly has interest for the general study of religion; my own writings in this area have attracted more interest among theologians (Ballor 2010) and sociologists (Farrell 2011) than among economists and environmentalists. But does it have any practical significance for the conduct of economic and public-policy analysis? Economists symbolically express a belief in economic progress and seek to provide the knowledge to guide society toward rapid economic growth. They did not, however, create this belief; it was part of a broad faith that emerged in the eighteenth century and was much strengthened in the nineteenth century in large segments of society (Manuel and Manuel 1979; Talmon [1960] 1985). (In some cases, such as Marxism, the specific form of the belief in progress originated with

a single economist.) Ironically, the American economics profession emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, not long before the events of World War I precipitated a crisis of confidence in progress in general. One might argue that in economists' current role as professionals, they are simply doing their job of providing priestly services for the most powerful religious force of the twentieth century. Why would economists (and policy analysts who apply economic methods) want to change?

Economists market themselves as scientists who discover universal truths (at least in the domain of economic affairs). As noted previously, this description is misleading in that economists employ a selective value lens in evaluating the benefits and costs of alternative public-policy proposals. In their thinking and research, they in effect incorporate a strong value bias in favor of public policies that promote the most rapid pace of material advance in society. Economists' view of themselves—that they take their values as "given" and simply work from that point of departure—is mistaken (Hoover 2003). The very methods of economics implicitly embody a powerful value system, which economists actively promote in American life both as a matter of providing supporting symbolism and as more concrete policy recommendations.

If economists were more widely recognized in American public life as working to advance a particular value system, a particular economic religion, this very perception might alter their influence in policy debates. Rather than serving a national consensus goal, they would be seen as partisans, not for a particular private interest group, but for a particular religion in American life. Of course, much the same can be said of environmentalists' self-image as well as their symbolic and policy roles. If both belief systems were generally recognized as competing secular religions, perhaps the altered (probably reduced) influence of economics and of environmentalism would roughly cancel out. There are, of course, other religions involved in the debate. Christianity might be a winner. At present, given American ways of thinking about church and state, economics and environmentalism are preferentially advantaged in the affairs of state. Environmental religion is, for example, actively proselytized today in public elementary and secondary schools, whereas any similar proselytizing of Christian religion is strictly prohibited (Nelson 2011).

America is historically a Christian nation. Christians have always viewed themselves as teaching the one universal truth, sending missionaries around the globe to convert every nation to this gospel. Protestants and Catholics may have fought fiercely at times over the details of Christianity, but this conflict was, they hoped, a temporary aberration. When economics and environmentalism now advertise themselves as revealers of the one correct—the one "scientific"—set of truths regarding society and the world, both thus follow in the Christian path.

In the United States in the twentieth century, the belief in economic progress became the leading religion. Although this belief was to some extent blended into mainstream Protestantism, it was in essence a secular religion. With the rise of environmental religion, a new secular religion is now challenging economic religion as a replacement for the paramount Protestant role of old. (It seems unlikely that the

more recent rise of evangelical Protestantism will ever be able to restore the old Protestant dominance in American life.)

The U.S. constitutional design assumes a balance among competing private interests but also requires a substantial degree of religious homogeneity in order for American society to work. Protestant Christianity once provided the religious glue to hold the nation together, ethically and otherwise, but it no longer does so. The religion of progress assumed this role for much of the twentieth century, but it is now increasingly challenged. The United States may now be entering a new era of genuine religious pluralism. Americans elected their first Roman Catholic president in 1960. Many of the immigrants arriving in the United States since the 1960s have come from nations such as China and India with little history of Christian belief. Even within secular religion, a new pluralism has emerged, as I have described. Capitalists and socialists may have fought fiercely over the best path of economic progress, but they had the same ultimate goal. Many environmentalists now suggest that human beings might conceivably be a malign element in the world, posing threats not only to humans' own future existence (with atomic weapons), but also to the future of all other plant and animal species on earth. One form of scientific progress, genetic engineering, is even raising difficult questions about what it may mean to be "human" in the future (Fukujama 2002).

All this seems to suggest that our contemporary political and constitutional crisis may ultimately have a religious explanation. Recent polls indicate public approval of the U.S. Congress at about 10 percent. Political debate and practice in Congress and in Washington in general have increasingly taken on the character of a "holy war" (Nelson 2010). U.S. political institutions designed to work with a certain amount of religious unity holding things together may no longer function with the present extent of religious pluralism.

No matter what, critical public issues will always remain, as will the need for economic and other forms of analysis of public-policy questions, whether they are specifically labeled as policy analysis or not. However, the manner of analyzing public-policy issues may change in a world of greater religious pluralism. Any claims to exclusive scientific authority in policy matters are certainly likely to meet with growing skepticism. The various paraphernalia of scientific authority that currently adorn the social and policy sciences may have to be scrapped. Economists and policy analysts may have to acquire greater humility. In the future, the conduct of economics and policy analysis may have to give a greater recognition to the role of culture and especially of religion (McCloskey 2000, 2006) This change may require some bruising and wrenching shifts in professional identity and direction among younger economists and policy analysts (we may simply have to wait for the older economists and policy analysts to retire). At present, the level of religious knowledge among most economists and policy analysts is low, and whatever such knowledge they have is not likely to have been acquired as part of their professional education, but from family and other personal circumstances.

Very broadly speaking, one can imagine two possible scenarios. Perhaps a new (or modified) religion will emerge in American life with a greater degree of consensus, thus providing the social glue that Protestant Christianity and then economic religion once provided. It is difficult, however, to imagine that this new religion will take an explicitly Christian form. Thus, although it may draw significantly on the Christian (and Jewish) heritage, as both economic religion and environmental religion do today, a new national religion seems more likely to be a secular belief system. It is conceivable, although difficult to predict with any certainty, that current economists and policy analysts (along with environmentalists) will play an important role in the basic elaboration and development of any such religion. In any event, however, economists and policy analysts may later come to function as the new religion's priesthood in matters of detailed policymaking and implementation. Playing this role may require the creation of new methods of economic and policy analysis that reflect new core religious values in American society.

A possible alternative would be the continuation of extensive religious pluralism in American society. Perhaps, just as the U.S. Constitution was originally devised to accommodate a balance of power among many competing private interests, new constitutional forms can be devised to better accommodate the greater religious pluralism in contemporary America. If that accommodation does not work, it may be necessary to undertake a geographic sorting out across the nation whereby people of common religious conviction increasingly live among one another, thereby avoiding the deep public tensions that so easily arise when agreement must be reached among the adherents of widely divergent religions. This sorting out would then have to be accompanied by an increasing decentralization of political power. In that case, we might have competing methods of economic and policy analysis, representing competing foundational religious values in different regions.

I have sketched the outlines of such a "libertarian" political possibility in the last chapter of my 2010 book *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion versus Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* and in some of my other writings that pertain to the changing character of American residential patterns, where such a sorting out is already beginning to occur locally (Nelson 2005). But these ideas are at present more preliminary thoughts than a well-formulated statement of a political philosophy.

Greater recognition of the underlying religious character of economics and environmentalism can serve economists and policy analysts (and environmentalists) well in several respects. It might give them a better intellectual understanding of why economists and environmentalists often have so much trouble in talking to one another. It might help in crafting policy proposals with a greater chance of acceptance by the other side. It might also encourage a healthy greater modesty among economists and policy analysts in advancing their ideas in political debates. Moreover, it might help to reduce the hypocrisy involved when powerful religious values are advanced in the name of objective economic or environmental "science."

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