
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Gus diZerega writes:

I read Robert Nelson's "Economics and Environmentalism: Belief Systems at Odds" in the summer 2012 issue with great interest. I respond now as a longtime Hayek scholar who admires markets as spontaneous orders and is also religious and an environmentalist. I have a stake in every group Nelson discusses. The gulf he describes is not as unbridgeable as he suggests and, more important, is located elsewhere and obscured in his analysis.

Environmentalism and Religion

Nelson describes environmentalism as opposed to the economic position that nature is simply a fund of resources available for human use. Environmentalists think nature has value over and above its utility to human beings and that these values should sometimes trump its utility.

This view is almost universal in human history. I think it is found in every religion on the planet, save *some* Protestant traditions. Within Christianity, orthodoxy even describes nature as a dimension of God, not simply as His creation.

Nelson cites Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion* as an example of environmentalism as secular religion. Taylor takes an insight common among humankind for as long as we have records and emphasized by environmentalists of every sort and places it in a secular framework. It is the *insight* about nature's value, not Taylor's particular view of it, that gives environmentalism its power.

Nelson also argues that environmentalism is a kind of secular Calvinism, disparaging material well-being as "making things worse" for depraved humans, who are a "cancer" on the world. Some environmentalists do fit this description. Most do not.

Consider Aldo Leopold, perhaps the most influential thinker among American environmentalists. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold describes the widespread public dismay when the last passenger pigeon died. Here, he writes, is "something new under the sun": beings who care about other beings of no utility to them. No more powerful empirical description of what distinguishes human beings from the

rest of nature exists anywhere. And it is good. His view is hardly a Calvinist-flavored description of human depravity.

Economics and Religion

Nelson equates economics with the “religion” of progress, with its many expressions from Marx to Progressives to modern free-market advocates. But here again I think he confuses a part with a whole.

Free markets emerge from people’s contractually exchanging property rights. These rights do not define themselves, and their content must come from outside of economics. Property rights define fields of possible relationships that owners may enter into with others and with the property owned. As such, a property right reflects a moral view of what human beings should legitimately be able to do. I can own my cat, but I may not own a person. I once could, however. I can buy his labor time, but what that purchase actually amounts to changes over time. I can cut up my sheet of paper, but in many places I may not cut up my living cat. Bundles of rights vary with the property owned and with what are considered legitimate relations to it and others.

Many environmentalists—I am one—believe that “getting property rights right” will solve our most pressing environmental problems. For example, see Peter Barnes’s *Capitalism 3.0* [Berkeley, Calif.: Berrett-Koehler, 2006]. Barnes bases his case on market economics.

There is no tension between economic theory and environmentalism; the tension lies between current and possible alternative definitions of property rights, as Nelson to some degree acknowledges. Economists who argue that nature is without value other than as a tool for human use import assumptions from outside their field. Both traditional economists and environmentalists can admire markets but see them as facilitating the expression of different value mixes within society.

Where the Problem Really Lies

There is an intrinsic tension between the market economy and the environment, but it has nothing to do with religion, and both environmentalists and nonenvironmentalists can agree about it. Nature and the market are complex adaptive systems maintained by processes of mutual adjustment among their elements. But nature adapts through biological variation and reproduction, the market through the spread of human insight and learning coordinated by price information. Except for bacteria and other rapidly reproducing life, nature adapts more slowly than the market. Although in the short run the market is more powerful, nature bats last and hits homers. There is a disconnect between short-run influence and long-run importance and therefore a challenge to bring them into harmony. This problem can be considered from either perspective, and these two considerations may well overlap significantly in content.

“Progress” as Nihilism

Modern science and philosophy have been rough on the Enlightenment’s separation of humanity from nature. As the distinction has broken down, humanity itself has become a resource for “progress.” Today’s suffering is justified by increased well-being tomorrow. All value consists of something’s utility for the future. Stalin and Mao provide the worst application of this logic, but Nelson’s emphasis on “efficiency” is a warning that this inhumane bias extends far more widely than the crimes of communism. People today are resources for attaining some ideal in the ever-receding future, and to maximize the speed with which we attain that future we need to maximize our ability to use today’s resources in service to tomorrow. Markets do so better than planning. Any disagreement is “NIMBYism.” When human beings are weeded out economically or otherwise in the name of efficiency, the better to approach an ever-receding goal, we are justified in asking, “Efficiency for what?”

The religion of progress does not truly respect human beings, let alone honor them as Aldo Leopold did.

Nelson misses this issue by conflating environmentalism with a “Calvinist” rejection of prosperity and equating economics with the embrace of open-ended “progress,” rather than recognizing that economics is simply a tool with which we can better understand voluntary transactions.

Robert H. Nelson replies:

Gus DiZerega argues that my article “Economics and Environmentalism: Belief Systems at Odds” is mistaken in asserting that there is a basic tension between economics and environmentalism. He reaches this conclusion, however, by focusing selectively on certain limited areas of economic and environmental thought. In making generalizations about subjects as broad as economics and environmentalism, it is necessary to examine overall tendencies in these areas.

DiZerega takes issue, for example, with my characterization of economics as a belief system that puts the achievement of economic progress at the core of its thinking. A suitably defined set of property rights, he asserts, would solve the most important environmental problems. Economics and environmentalism, therefore, are in fact quite compatible.

The American economics profession, however, originated in the Progressive Era, whose thinking has been characterized by historians as the “gospel of efficiency.” Throughout the twentieth century, mainstream economists evaluated the desirability of alternative public policies in terms of the extent to which they advanced the goal of the efficient use of the resources of society. Environmental regulation, for example, was necessary because environmental “externalities” would otherwise yield an inefficient market outcome (though this argument ignored the inefficiencies of the government regulatory process itself).

Efficiency was so important because it was the operative measure of success in maximizing the rate of economic progress, which was so important because it was the true path to heaven on Earth. If economic scarcity could be eliminated, as “economic religion” preached, the human condition as a whole—not only the material side of life—could be perfected.

So many economists have looked to markets as the ideal form of economic organization because markets do in fact maximize the rate of economic progress. In most societies historically, there have been strong political, institutional, and normative obstacles to rapid economic change. A market system, however, ruthlessly disregards all such noneconomic obstacles in the name of the impersonal advancement of efficiency and progress.

Indeed, it is this willingness to elevate economic progress to the highest value in society, casting aside tradition and whatever else stands in the way, that in the modern age has been the distinctive characteristic of the market and the key to its success. Environmentalism is only the most recent of a long series of opposing forces in society that have sought to curb the market in the name of other, higher noneconomic values. Marxism, for example, while claiming to serve economic progress, in Russia at least was a disguised form of conservative traditionalism, maintaining Russian authoritarian and Orthodox traditions in a newly modernist, “scientific” guise. Russia today under Putin is seemingly not much changed, again all the worse for the market.

Whatever the final verdict, all the leading economic debates of the twentieth century were about the actual best path of efficiency and progress: capitalism or socialism? DiZerega can of course identify a few counterexamples, but they hardly represent the main thrust of economic thought of the twentieth century, which continues to exert a powerful influence in the mainstream economics of the twenty-first century.

DiZerega similarly mischaracterizes the main thrust of environmentalism since it emerged as a powerful force in American life in the 1960s. He takes issue with my argument that there is a strong Calvinist element in contemporary environmentalism. There is no doubt, however, that John Calvin and his Puritan successors in England and America would have found the modern worship of progress to be a great heresy. When Rachel Carson in 1962 in *Silent Spring* preached the evils of DDT, she was offering a newly secularized version of an old message. Indeed, she explicitly identified the modern worship of progress as a false religion against which she was compelled to speak out.

Calvinism saw the human presence on earth to be one of grave sinfulness and corruption. DiZerega here again disputes my suggestion that contemporary environmentalism follows in a similar path. Yet it was David Brower, the executive director of the Sierra Club for eighteen years and a leading environmentalist of the second half of the twentieth century, who described the human presence on earth as a “cancer.” It is true that most mainstream environmentalists today do not go so far, but this reticence is due mainly to political pragmatism or intellectual confusion on their part.

Brower was simply being more honest in actually following environmental logic wherever it might lead.

In the “environmental religion,” a wilderness “cathedral,” for example, is defined by the minimum presence of any human impact. For environmentalism, “natural” and “unnatural” have replaced the Christian good and evil as core ethical judgments. What is “natural” for environmentalism is what is least affected by human beings; what is “unnatural”—the new secular environmental translation of “evil”—is what is most affected by human beings. The resulting logical conclusion is clear: if the good is ever to triumph on Earth, human beings will not be part of the picture. Absent any redeeming God in the universe, Calvin himself would have agreed.

DiZerega does agree with my argument that environmentalism puts a new value on nature that lies outside the progressive economic viewpoint that “natural resources” exist to advance economic efficiency and human welfare. For environmentalists, nature has an “intrinsic value” altogether independent of human beings—an idea that can scarcely be comprehended in standard welfare economics (even if some confused economists have attempted to do so by proposing to measure “existence value” scientifically).

Calvinism, I should say, does give us a good reason to put an intrinsic value on nature, however “uneconomic” this reason may be. For Calvin (along with many other Christian theologians of the past), nature is God’s creation. As such, the natural world represents God’s “artwork.” To visit an “untouched” wilderness area is therefore to be in the presence of a visible manifestation of God’s own creative thinking in forming the world; it is to learn something fundamental about the mind of God. Even though contemporary environmental believers do not recognize the historic religious sources of their own feelings of awe and wonderment in being in the presence of wild nature, they do feel much the same sense of deep spiritual inspiration. But when they leave God out of their argument, as most do, the thinking simply becomes incoherent.

Most economists I meet recognize a clear tension between their own thinking and environmentalism; most environmentalists similarly acknowledge that they are often uncomfortable with economic reasoning. This observation is hardly a novel insight. The purpose of my article was to explore why this tension arises, finding that its fundamental source lies in a (secular) religious disagreement. (For further details, see Robert Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion versus Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* [University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2010].)

DiZerega, however, as he acknowledges, sees himself as a true believer in traditional religion, economics, and environmentalism, all at the same time. In order to maintain this difficult intellectual balancing act, it is necessary for him to find a way to see economics and environmentalism as mutually supportive, even if this view takes him outside the mainstream understandings. But the mainstream belief systems of economics and environmentalism are the focus of my article.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

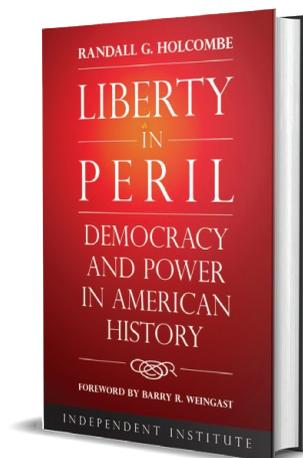
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

