The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America

Reviewed by John C. Bergstrom, University of Georgia

With the United States and much of the rest of the world still reeling from the effects of a severe economic recession, there is much talk in the current political arena and media about the need to “get the economy growing again” and create more jobs. In recent times, there has also been worldwide concern over the potential negative environmental effects of global climate change, leading to much talk in the current political arena and media about the need to “do something about climate change” by reducing CO₂ emissions. What do the advocates of focusing our efforts on economic growth, or being more concerned with environmental protection have in common? The overall theme of Robert Nelson’s book is that these two groups have more in common than may first meet the eye, particularly with respect to the underlying philosophical or religious bases for their advocacy positions. Nelson argues that, even if they are not aware of it, economic growth and environmental protection advocates in America both approach their advocacy positions with “religious convictions” drawn from the influences of Judeo-Christian history and thought in the United States. For example, both groups believe that the Earth and its inhabitants can achieve some ideal state-of-the-world in the here and now—that is, some type of “heaven on earth.” For economic growth advocates, “heaven on earth” is a healthy, robust economy where everyone’s material needs (and perhaps most of their wants) are met via well-paying jobs and a benevolent government which makes sure everyone is well-cared for in every way. For environmental protection advocates, “heaven on earth” is a healthy, robust environment where people and all other creatures live in harmony with each other and their natural habitats, and at least the basic needs of all creatures are met in a sustainable manner.

Nelson points out that both groups also tend to believe that one of the main barriers to achieving ideal economic or environmental states-of-the world are people who just will not do the right thing because of their flawed characters (e.g., “they just don’t appreciate the environment enough” or “they just don’t care enough about providing good jobs for everyone”). Both groups then also tend to believe that if we could just “fix people” and get them thinking and acting correctly (e.g., about the
economy or environment), our economic or environmental problems could be solved and ideal states-of-the-world achieved. Thus, in summary, Nelson suggests that the narratives of both economic growth and environmental protection advocates are remarkably similar to the standard Judeo-Christian narrative of “creation-fall-redemption.” That is, either in antiquity or conceptually, there exists an ideal state-of-the-world—e.g., an economic or environmental “Garden of Eden,” if you will. The goal of economic or environmental policy is then to get back to or achieve this “Garden of Eden” or ideal state-of-the-world. The main constraint, though, is people who just will not do the right thing (e.g., sinful, “fallen” people). These flawed people need to be “redeemed” (e.g., brought around to thinking and acting correctly about the economy or environment). Once this fundamental change in people happens, we will then be able to restore or establish an ideal economic or environmental state-of-the-world or “heaven on earth.”

The structure, organization, and style of the book are very clear and readable. Part I of the book discusses the economic growth and well-being movement and the “false god of economic salvation.” Part I includes chapters on “economic theology,” “theologies of 9-11,” economic valuation and existence values, sustainability and efficiency, and progressivism. Part II includes two chapters on “Environmental Calvinism.” In these chapters, Nelson argues that much of the modern day environmental movement narrative can be characterized as a type of “Calvinism minus God.” Part III provides more discussion of the environmental protection and quality movement from an “environmental creationism” perspective. Part III includes chapters on ecological science as a creation story, environmental and Christian creationism, ecological and wilderness restoration, and environmental colonialism. Readers familiar with (and perhaps critical of) the world’s history of economic colonialism in places such as America and Africa will especially be interested in the environmental colonialism chapter, which discusses how developed countries have “exploited” developing countries for environmental protection reasons. Part IV deals with relationships between environmentalism and libertarianism, including a chapter on Frank Knight and “Economic Calvinism” (which is another type of “Calvinism minus God”), and a chapter discussing the commonality between the tenets of modern-day environmentalism and libertarian thought. The book concludes with a thought-provoking chapter on challenges related to “economic religion,” “environmental religion,” and the true God and religion of the Bible.

This book is a good read for economists of all backgrounds and
persuasions, including Christian economists, for several reasons. First, the overall theme and theses of the book provide stimulating food for thought and insights into the possible ethical and philosophical drivers underlying the economic growth and environmental protection advocacy positions, movements, and policies in contemporary America. Some economists and environmentalists will disagree with Nelson’s premise that their desire to “save the world” through economic growth or environmental protection has religious origins and undertones. However, I think even these economists and environmentalists will gain valuable information and insights from reading Nelson’s well-researched and thought-out analyses of these origins and undertones. Reading his book will provide everyone with very useful information and background on the history and development of both the progressive economic growth and well-being movement and the environmental protection and quality movement. My only real criticism of the book is that I think the “holy wars” vernacular is a bit over-dramatic and not really reflective of the book’s main thrust of tracing the religious origins and undertones of the contemporary economic growth and environmental protection movements and philosophies. To the extent that religious or philosophical conflicts or “wars” exist between people in these two movements, I believe reading the book may help both economists and environmentalists (including and perhaps especially those of the Christian faith) to better understand each other and perhaps reach common ground and complementary solutions to our pressing economic and environmental problems.

This book does not provide a theological or biblical treatise on the economic growth and environmental protection debate, and stays away from potentially controversial biblical issues related to this debate (e.g., different interpretations of what the Bible has to say about economic growth and environmental protection). Thus, Christian economists looking for biblical guidance, insight, and perspectives on this debate will need to look elsewhere (there does exist a fairly large body of literature along these lines). However, related to a biblical perspective on economic growth and environmental quality, I think most Christian economists would be fascinated (as I was) by the parallels Nelson draws between the modern economic and environmental secular “religions” and traditional Judeo-Christian values and perspectives, including the creation-fall-redemption narrative and story of the Bible. In his final chapter, Nelson also provides a discussion of challenges posed by various secular “religions” and some personal reflections on this topic which Christian economists and others should find interesting, even if they find themselves disagreeing with some of his conclusions.