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Review: Robert H. Nelson, The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America

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Johns is at his best when examining the literary figures that occupy the majority of his analysis. His claim that the American literary tradition reveals ways to resist teleological thinking about technology, and his analysis of how Melville, Faulkner, and Ellison achieve this, are the most important contributions of his book.

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

By Robert H. Nelson. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. Pp. xxi+388. $39.95.

Robert Nelson argues that environmentalism and economics represent competing religious worldviews. Within this framework, debates over issues like global warming and acid rain become veiled theological disputes between these two "secular religions." Nelson paints with a broad, aggressive brush. This is both the strength and weakness of his book, as he conjures a world of epic battles between the economic faithful, who worship material progress, and the environmentally pious, who bemoan the corruption visited by humans upon the natural world. In each case, Nelson finds deeper historical and theological roots for current debates.

On the environmental side, we discover that it all goes back to Calvinists and Puritans, who railed against human pride and corruption. Today, modern environmentalists follow in their footsteps by attacking the corruption of modern society, which has embraced the false god of economic progress. John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, archetypal environmental writers with Puritan and Calvinist roots, provide important evidence for these claims. As opposed to environmental Calvinists, economic religion apparently has Catholic roots. (Maybe I've been reading too much Max Weber, but I found this analogy particularly jarring.) Like the Catholic Church, modern America has an "economic priesthood." "Earlier Christian priesthoods advised governments on the commandments of a biblical God; the economics profession has advised on the necessary efficiency steps on the path of economic progress, the reigning gospel of the twentieth century" (p. 28). The high priest of this economic priesthood is, of course, Milton Friedman.

Nelson is consciously extending the work of Deirdre McCloskey, who did much to pioneer the study of economics as a particular form of positivist rhetoric. Whereas "her emphasis was more on seeing economics as a disguised metaphysics rather than religion per se" (p. xxiii), Nelson wants

to emphasize the religious aspects. In his hands—and here is the biggest problem with the book—the entire world becomes enchanted; the reader is left wondering whether, in Nelson's account, anything is not religious.

Nelson means to be provocative, and he succeeds. Professional historians may find the book problematic and oversimplified, but we are not the target audience. Nelson teaches at a school of public policy, where students will learn much about economic analysis and organizational studies, but little about history and religion. If my own classroom is any measure, Nelson has interesting and provocative things to say to such students and to the broader public. And while professional historians may disagree with his analysis, we all need to think more about the metaphysical and religious foundations of ideas that seem, on their surface, merely technical.

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