Modernization as Liberation
Theology

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus

One of the most enduring characteristics of human civilization is the way ruling elites espouse beliefs radically at odds with their own behaviors. The ancient Greeks recited the cautionary tales of Prometheus and Icarus while using fire, dreaming of flight, and pursuing technological frontiers. Early agriculturalists told the story of the fall from Eden as a cautionary tale against agriculture. European Christians espoused poverty and peace-making while accumulating wealth and waging war. And today the world’s most technology-rich consumers voice anxiety that continuing technological progress and consumption will be our downfall.

This essay builds on the arguments made by Bruno Latour and others that we should be suspicious of philosophies (e.g., Platonism) and religions that reject this world (“nature”) for other words. Dealing with ecological problems (“crises”) instead requires a belief system that embraces an evolving, developing Creation—human and nonhuman. “Moralistic, spiritualist, psychological, and, I would argue, scientistic definitions of religion have,” Latour argues, “led theology, rituals, and prayers to turn away from the world.”

While Latour is concerned with the ways religion turns away from the nonhuman world, we are concerned with a mirrored problem, the ways in which eco-religion turns away from the human world. Those most active in dealing with ecological problems like global warming turn away from, and often against, the process of modernization, viewing it as destroying nature. This view is characterized by feelings of both hope and dread. Global warming, on the one hand, undermines nature. On the other hand, Greens say, it could result in a kind of apocalypse (from the Greek for “revelation”), which could lead to a new, more natural world. This view animates mainstream green texts from Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* to Alan Weisman’s best-selling *A World Without Us*, a scientifically informed fable about the return of the nonhuman world after humans are gone from the earth.
These narratives help comprise an eco-theology that has become a dominant worldview of cosmopolitan elites in the West. Over the past ten years the eco-apocalyptic view spread from a minority of intellectuals to the majority of elites in the developed world. Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and Gordon Brown at the United Nations Copenhagen Climate Conference talks to billionaires such as Google investor John Doerr and Virgin’s Richard Branson to elite university students, professors, and educated liberals in Europe and the United States increasingly agree that some kind of collective sacrifice is needed to avoid the end of the world and/or create a new ecological one. Either peacefully through ecological enlightenment or violently through ecological disasters, green cosmopolitans increasingly came to believe that humans must move to a new ecological way of being because Nature demands it.

But while eco-theology preaches limits to consumption and sacrifice, its adherents practice consumption at ever-greater levels. Indeed, the most visible and common expressions of faith in ecological salvation are new forms of consumptions. Green products and services—the Toyota Prius, the efficient washer/dryer, the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)—certified office building—are consciously identified by consumers as things they do to express their higher moral status. And yet, the belief that we must radically curtail our consumption in order to survive as a civilization is no impediment to elites paying for private university educations, frequent jet travels, and iPads.

Hypocrisy has rarely been a hindrance to religion and may, paradoxically, contribute to its power. In not practicing what he preaches the religious man affirms his superior status. He is communicating that he should be held at a different standard than the herd. That he communicates this through his behavior even as he says that all are equal before the gods is even more powerful. Paying for one’s transgressions through indulgences, carbon offsets, or contributions to the temple are all ways of affirming superiority.

But green anticonsumption consumerism is more than a contradiction; it is an obstacle to achieving the kinds of changes required to save Creation, including biological diversity, nonhuman habitats, and resilience to climate change. Those actions include things like replacing fossil fuels with low-carbon alternatives, increasing agricultural yields to increase food production and reduce habitat destruction, and accelerating development so the poor are protected from the vagaries and violence of climate change.

**Technophobia As Nihilism**

For much of human and prehuman history we have both celebrated and been wary of our tools. But technology anxiety sharpened considerably among developed-world elites after the Second World War. Technology anxiety grew in part to the awareness that a nuclear war could result in a nuclear winter destroying the basis for life on earth. But the anxiety quickly spread to smaller and more local threats: pesticides like DDT or genetically engineered