Inside the Carbon Cult

Reports on the religious character
of the environmental movement

Kevin D. Williamson

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Foreword

Kevin D. Williamson has a pretty good claim to being the best columnist in the United States right now. I don't say that lightly. We Brits, as you may have noticed, are sparing in our use of superlatives. But I can't think of anyone else in whom all the qualities that make for a great opinion writer are so sweetly blended.

Which qualities? First of all, intense curiosity. There are plenty of columnists who make a good living by serving up predictable arguments in well-spiced language. Their readers, who know in advance exactly what they are buying, nod along vigorously, enjoying the sensation of having their prejudices confirmed. But shall I let you into a professional secret, as an old newspaper hack myself? These are the easiest columns to write. They require no specialist knowledge and precious little research. All you have to do is read the news, maybe follow one or two links to original sources, and possibly phone an expert on whom you can try out your thesis.

Williamson is not a grandee who bloviates on TV shows. He is a newsman to his inky fingertips, always ready to engage in his own investigations. Here is a man who used to write for the local paper in Lubbock, Texas, and who worked for a time as a theater critic. You see the thoroughness of a seasoned reporter in the following collection. Anyone can toss off colorful opinions about the eco-loons. But Williamson covered the Glasgow summit

in detail, asking penetrating questions. He bothered to get into the detail of the nuclear debate. The ensuing essays show it.

Next, Williamson is blessed with a fine turn of phrase. "Outrage is intoxicating, and like other intoxicants, it makes people stupid." "When things go sideways in this unhappy world, nobody cries out in the dead of night: 'For the love of God, somebody call the Dutch!'" His clever phrases are not, as they can be in the hands of a lesser journalist, a cover for ambiguity. Rather, they emphasize and solidify his arguments.

Then there is his versatility. There are few subjects to which he cannot turn his hand: popular music, technology, art, religion, sports, drugs, history, economics. Give him a topic and he will find intelligent and original things to say about it, thoroughly researched and beautifully expressed.

Finally, there is his independence. Yes, Williamson has a point of view. He is, broadly speaking, a Right-of-Center free-marketeer. But he is anything but predictable. During the Trump era, almost all conservative writers took sides. Either the president was a threat to the republic, or he was the people's champion, finally taking the fight to the libs. Williamson was unimpressed. He saw Trump as representing the kind of two-bit Caesarism that the Founders had warned against, and found his buffoonish antics embarrassing. But he never gave into hatred, acknowledging the things that went well under the 45th president without ever losing his skepticism.

All those qualities are on display in the pages that follow. Williamson is by no means the first writer to draw attention to the quasi-religious nature of some eco-campaigners, for

example. But when have you ever seen that point made so vividly, so humorously and based on so much primary evidence?

Throughout, Williamson's dramatic prose is tempered by his cool-headed detachment. He does not deny that the world is heating, nor that human activity is playing its part. He simply points to some of the absurdities that have flowed from our determination to approach climate change in millenarian rather than transactional terms. Instead of assessing the problem and finding the most cost-effective way to treat it, we have entered into a ghoulish spiral of competitive pessimism.

Edmund Burke spoke of society as a partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn. Nowhere is this clearer or more important than when it comes to the environment. This is altogether too important a field to be left to the Left—which is why we are lucky to have a thinker of Williamson's caliber engaged. He has the great gift of being able to take complex themes and make them comprehensible. How fortunate that he uses his powers for good.

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Introduction

This is not a religious book in the sense of its being meant to convey a religious message or for people of a particular religion—it is a book containing three journalistic reports about a religion, or a sort of religion, that emerged from and then subsumed the environmental movement. Today, that movement is a kind of cult and not a political movement at all, if it ever was one. Those who profess one of the Abrahamic faiths have a religious interest in idolatry because it perverts religion and leads religion to inhuman ends—Norman Podhoretz, in his very interesting book *The Prophets*, describes the ancient Israelite "war on idolatry" as a matter that is not exclusively otherworldly but very much rooted in a campaign against the ghastly *social* practices associated with idolatry: cannibalism, child sacrifice, etc. And if idolatry makes a hash of religion, it is, if anything, even more of a menace to the practice of politics, which is my subject.

I suspect that some of you may object to the term idolatry here, or to the description of the environmental movement as a kind of cult—that some readers may regard these as rhetorical excesses. All that I have to say in my defense is that this is a factual and literal account of what I have seen and heard in reporting about the environmental movement, in the actual explicit religious ceremonies that were conducted in and around the United Nations climate conference in Glasgow in 2021, in my conversations with

such figures as the "voluntary human extinction" activist who calls himself Les U. Knight, in my conversations with those who object to clean and economical nuclear power on grounds that are, even when not accompanied by pseudo-religious Gaia rhetoric, fundamentally *metaphysical*. What is at work is a kind of sophomoric, cartoon puritanism that regards modernity—and, in particular, the extent and pattern of consumption in the modern developed world—as sinful. One need not squint too much to recognize very old Christian (or even Stoic) aversion to "luxury" in these denunciations.

Indeed, we need only take the true believers at their word. As scientists have been searching for economic, abundant, and environmentally responsible sources of energy to support human flourishing, the environmentalists have resisted and abominated these efforts: Amory Lovins of Friends of the Earth declared that "it would be little short of disastrous for us to discover a source of clean, cheap, abundant energy"—and please note there the inclusion of *clean*—while *Population Bomb* author Paul Ehrlich famously opined that "giving society cheap, abundant energy at this point would be the equivalent of giving an idiot child a machine gun." Professor Ehrlich gives up the game with "at this point"—meaning, of course, in our fallen, postlapsarian state.

It was, of course, inevitable that Professor Ehrlich—who has been spectacularly wrong about practically every prediction he has made in his lucrative career as a secular, Malthusian prophet—should be back in the news at the same time scientists were announcing a breakthrough in nuclear fusion research. Professor Ehrlich, recently seen

on *60 Minutes* (which still *exists*!) and elsewhere, downplays the recent advance in fusion on the grounds that current patterns of human living are "unsustainable." Professor Ehrlich has been giving the same interview for decade and decades—advances in energy production will not matter because "the world will have long since succumbed to overpopulation, famine," and other ills, as he insisted in an interview published by the *Los Angeles Times*—in 1989—not long after insisting that the United Kingdom would be ravished by famine no later than the year 2000. He made that prediction in the 1970s after predicting in the late 1960s: "In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."

William F. Buckley Jr., borrowing from the political theorist Eric Voegelin, advised the idealists of the 1960s: "Don't immanentize the eschaton," i.e., don't try to bring about a utopian state of affairs through political means. The eschaton to which Buckley referred was a Christian eschaton of the end of days: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." But there are many other possible eschatons, many of them a good deal less cheerful. End-of-days stories have long been a staple of religions and cults of many different kinds and characters, of course, and the environmental movement is fundamentally eschatological in its orientation, by turns utopian and apocalyptic. It is at the moment more apocalyptic than utopian, but that is a reflection of a broader trend in our politics and our society.

The Western world, in particular, the English-speaking Western world, has been fervently praying for its own demise for a generation. Future historians will note the prevalence of zombie-apocalypse stories in our time—*The*

Walking Dead has recently concluded its main series but will be supplemented by numerous spinoffs, while one of the most intensely anticipated television series of 2023 is *The Last of Us*, an adaptation of a video game that is based on yet another variation of the zombie-apocalypse theme—but beyond zombie-apocalypse stories we have alien-invasion-apocalypse stories (*Falling Skies, Independence Day, Battle: Los Angeles, 10 Cloverfield Lane, Captive State*), epidemic-apocalypse stories (*Train To Busan*, *Outbreak*, *12 Monkeys*, *Contagion*), zombie-epidemic-hybrid-apocalypse stories (*28 Days Later*), alien-invasion-epidemic-hybrid-apocalypse stories (all those many versions of *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers*), zombie-eco-hybrid stories (the aforementioned *The Last of Us*) nuclear apocalypse stories (*The Road, Mad Max*, *Book of Eli*), EMP-apocalypse stories and related nonspecific techno-failure-apocalypse stories (James Wesley Rawles's survivalist novels), meteor-apocalypse stories (the fraternal twins *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, and, of course, *Meteor Apocalypse*), and, precisely to our point here, eco-apocalypse stories by the dozen (*The Day After Tomorrow, Snowpiercer, Waterworld, Interstellar, Wall-E*).

What these stories have in common is not the particular source of anxiety, though environmental concerns are interlaced into many stories: *The Last of Us* is a zombie story, but the zombies are produced by global warming, which allows a particular fungus to colonize and control human brains. (One shared article of faith that is present not only in zombie movies but also from campy, anencephalic or macrocephalic aliens of *Mars Attacks!* and *Independence Day*—the enemy is the *brain*.) What they have in common, rather, is a two-sided fascination with social collapse, both

the negative aspects—the inevitable suffering—and the positive—the possibility of a return to innocence and a shared born-against experience that retroactively sanctifies that suffering. The eco-terrorist character Brad Pitt plays in *12 Monkeys* might as well be the character he plays in *Fight Club*, the masculinist eco-prophet who promises his followers: "In the world I see, you are stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you'll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison on the empty carpool lane of some abandoned superhighway."

Which is to say, what we have here is the old mythological cycle of suffering, death, and rebirth told at the *social* level rather than at the level of individual hero or martyr.

None of this is to say that there are not real environmental challenges in front of us. These are real, and they deserve serious attention. But here in the third decade of the benighted 21st century, the environmental movement is not about that. It is an apocalyptic-fantasy cult. Of course there are people who think of themselves as adherents of that movement who are doing real work in science and policy, in much the same way that the alchemists and magicians of the medieval period laid the foundations for much of modern science, including a great deal of chemistry and astronomy. The two phenomena are by no means mutually exclusive.

But if you want to understand why there has been so frustratingly little meaningful progress in environmental policy in the United States, the United Kingdom, and

the European Union in the past 30 years or so, then understanding the cultic character of the environmental movement is essential. The real environmental-policy debate should be, not to put too fine a point on it, *boring*, though by no means simple—a largely technical matter of understanding tradeoffs and drawing up policies that attempt to balance competing goods (environmental, recreational, economic, social, etc.) and putting those policies to the test of democratic accountability. None of this is easy in a connected and global world—prohibit the use of coal in the United States and you might end up increasing worldwide coal-related greenhouse-gas emissions as relatively dirty power plants in China and India take up the slack in consumption—but none of it ought to present a Manichean conflict, either.

Demagoguery is an old and obvious factor in all political discourse, but there is at work here something deeper than mere political opportunism, and that is the invariable human need, sometimes subtly realized, to rewrite complex stories as simple stories, replacing real-world complexity with the anaesthetizing simplicity of heroes and villains. We have been here before, of course. Consider Robert Wiebe's anthropology of bureaucracy in the Progressive Era in *The Search for Order*:

> The sanguine followers of the bureaucratic way constructed their world on a comfortable set of assumptions. While they shaded many of the old moral absolutes, they still thought in terms of normal and abnormal. Rationality and peace, decent living conditions and equal opportunity, they considered "natural"; passion and violence, slums and deprivation, were "unnatural." Knowledge, they were convinced, was power, specifically the power to guide men into the future. Consequently, these hopeful people also exposed themselves to the shock of bloody catastrophe. In contrast to the predetermined stages of the idealists, however, bureaucratic thought had made indeterminate process central to its approach. Presupposing the unexpected, its adherents were most resilient just where the idealists were most brittle.

Of course, the assumptions described by Wiebe are precisely backward: It is deprivation and violence that are natural, peace and plenty that are unnatural. As Thomas Sowell famously observed, poverty has no causes—prosperity has causes, while poverty is the natural state of human affairs, present and effective *ex nihilo*. But the conflation of the *natural* and the *desirable* is always with us: Like most Americans, I treasure our national parks and have spent many enjoyable days in them, but it is difficult to think of any environment anywhere on Earth that is less *natural* than Yellowstone, the highly artificial environment

that is the product of planning and policy, for instance in the programmatic introduction of grey wolves and other species.

To subscribe to a genuinely natural view of the world and man's place in it, as opposed to a quasi-religious environmental dualism, is to understand man as integral part of nature, in which case you might think of Midtown Manhattan as a less artificial and more organic environment than Yellowstone, its features and patterns considerably more spontaneous than what one finds in a diligently managed nature preserve. If, on the other hand, you understand the natural world and the wild places in it principally as a paradisiac spiritual counterpoint to the fallen state of man as represented in our urban and technological civilization, then you cannot make any kind of reasonable tradeoff calculation when it comes to, say, drilling for gas in the Arctic, which must be regarded not as a poor policy choice but as a profanation, a "violation" of that which is "pristine" and "sacred"—words that one commonly hears applied to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and to many less exalted swamps and swathes of tundra.

For myself, what I want is a boring environmental policy, one that is, in Wiebe's terms, less brittle and more resilient, one that in "presupposing the unexpected" is able to account for developments that complicate our environmental policies by enmeshing them in other policies that they also complicate. For example, try putting yourself in the position of a responsible policy analyst in 1968, when Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* hit the shelves. In 1968, it would have been very difficult to imagine the subsequent transformation of China into a modern economic power—

and even more difficult to imagine that this development would be not entirely and unqualifiedly good for the world, given the resources it has put at the disposal of what today must be regarded as history's most encompassing and sophisticated police state. (So far.) But instead of a political discourse that can take such developments on their own terms and put them into a context of competing goods and tradeoffs, we end up instead with a parade of Great Satans: For the environmental cultists, the Great Satan is Exxon; for certain self-described nationalists in the United States, the Great Satan is the Chinese Communist Party; the strangely durable Marxists and the neo-nationalists on the Right have, with utter predictability, converged on their choice of Great Satans, these being transnational "elites." And so the religious appetite is satisfied through politics, including, in a particularly intense way, through environmental politics.

To take one example that seems very obvious to me, the United States and much of the rest of the world, including the developing world, would be much better off on practically every applicable metric if there were wider and more sophisticated deployment of nuclear power, which is not a panacea by any means, but is a reliable, economical, and effectively zero-emissions way to produce electricity at utility scale. The case against nuclear power might be described, in generous terms, as "moral" or "pseudo-religious" but might be described more accurately as "superstitious." But maybe that kind of metaphysical primitivism is to be expected from a political movement whose economic agenda includes a great deal of physical primitivism as well: In the neo-Neolithic future of their dreams, there won't be much to do in the evenings except

bark at the moon, so one may as well try to imbue it with some transcendent meaning.

The environment matters. So do property rights, trade, development, agriculture, medicine, energy, the rule of law, democracy, and the uncountable other constituent elements of human flourishing. A reasonable environmental policy can work with that, but a spiritualized and cultic environmental policy cannot. I hope these reports will help to make it clear just how real the choice between these two kinds of environmentalism is.

Kevin D. Williamson

Myths of the 21st Century

December 2, 2021

Glasgow, Scotland

There is a whiff of incense in the air, sweet and heavy as tree sap. The theme is "Spiritual and Religious Perspectives on the Climate Emergency," and Calder Tsuyuki-Tomlinson is conducting a tea ceremony — "sitting with the future, sipping the present" — and thereby illuminating the "intrinsic ephemerality of things." I enjoy the smell of the incense, but here at COP26, the annual United Nations climate-change convention, we are all about the Science!, and the Science! doesn't think much of burning incense indoors: particulate matter, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, etc. Burning wood may be carbon-neutral, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, but it is a serious indoor-air-quality concern, if you're concerned about that kind of thing — about Science! At COP26, I met monks, mystics, and misanthropes, but I didn't meet one person who knew the first thing about indoor-air quality.

The climate movement likes to wear the cloak of Science!, but here on the streets of Glasgow, inevitably described as "gritty," it is a movement of slogans — fruity and loopy and hippie and New Agey inside the Scottish Exhibition Center, where the United Nations-approved activists and critics and RINGOs and QUANGOs and YOUNGOs offer

up their predictable maxims ("We Have a Right to Climate Education" and "The Future Is Female" and the inevitable "Black Lives Matter"), but they get angrier and ragier and a good deal less grammatical as you move outward through the concentric circles of Serious Power, centered today on the most sacred person of Barack Obama, paying a surprise visit and upstaging the official U.S envoy, haughty private-jet enthusiast John Kerry, which is plainly part of the former president's extended, "Hey, Joe Biden Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time!" tour. And the mottos and calls to arms and such grow positively hostile as you land on the actual Glaswegian street, outside of the barricaded zone of U.N. approval, where there is talk of Nuremberg-style trials for "climate criminals" and naked anti-humanism ("Love the Planet: Hate Children!") and graffiti scrawled either by some quasi-illiterate climate warrior with approximately Greta Thunberg's education or by some ingenious and nihilistic street philosopher offering up Plato-by-way-of-N.W.A.:

"F*** the Polis!"

This particular rainy and postindustrial *polis* — well, someone already has done the deed, and that some time ago. Glasgow is a charming third-tier city that is in no way ready for globalist do-goodery on this scale. It actually takes longer to get a taxi at the airport than it takes to fly here from London, and as I wait, muttering to myself in the cold and damp — and then in the cold and damp and the *dark* when the lights outside the airport go off — I can't help but think some seriously climate criminal-type thoughts, like: "Well, here we are in more or less the future you greenie-weenie utopian ass-clowns have planned for us, cold and wet and

exhausted and longing in the darkness for the gentle rumble of an internal-combustion engine turning dinosaur juice into convenience." You can tell the COP26 gang, at least the young ones, by their shiny new North Face backpacks, none of which has ever seen a day's camping. But the kids from Oberlin and Haverford aren't riding their bikes off to their hostels or Airbnbs or hotels, and they aren't taking the bus — they are getting into the back seat of an automobile and exchanging currency for services rendered. I don't mind their looking to their comfort, but I could do with a good deal less sanctimony out of them, these smirking and scowling and po-faced youngsters assuring one another that what happens here in Glasgow this week will make or break the future of the human race, and doing so with the kind of confidence that can be mustered only by people who have never made a mortgage payment — the generation that put the "I" in iPhone.

I do the Tom Friedman thing and interview my taxi driver. COVID-19, he says, hit the taxi business so hard that a significant number of drivers left and never came back, having found other work. But the regulators still make it pretty hard to take an Uber from the airport instead. So it's the worst of both worlds.

The convention center is as completely overwhelmed as the airport, and getting in is like boarding a cruise ship full of people who are angry to be getting on a cruise ship, the concessions and amenities are overrun, there isn't a seat to be had anywhere in the complex, and the official press, the very town criers of globalism itself, stampede around from place to place, chasing rumors of Obama sightings, clopping and swishing in damp Banana Republic workwear

like beasts of some digital savannah being chased by a lioness. One tells another with great excitement and total confidence that Xi Jinping has made an appearance, but there is no Xi in the house, and in fact, all the Chi-Com party bosses have followed the order to stay away in droves, as have the Russians.

The Americans have a big splashy spread in the exhibition center, with a scheduled presentation by the good people of Minnesota about how the Midwest is leading the way to a greener America and a greener world, which inspires gales of merriment and puts big half-amused–half-bitter grins upon the fresh-scrubbed young faces of high-level elite global do-gooding. The Americans at the American pavilion aren't quite as lonely as the guys over at the No-Really-Nuclear-Power-Is-Great-for-the-Climate booth, who are the focus of all available side-eye, but nobody is tripping over himself to hear what Uncle Sam, the Great Satan of CO_2, has to say for himself.

It's all pretty tense. I figure that what I need is a Zen monk, and I get two of them: Brother Spirit and Brother Embrace, a couple of French monks who talk about the climate in terms of stress and anxiety — these being concerns for the Zen practitioner — and are positively hyped for the deployment of "spiritual technology" in the climate crisis. Brother Spirit assures me that what he's talking about when he talks about "spiritual technology" isn't some wacky mystical hoo-ha but meditation (which is wacky mystical hoo-ha, but never mind) and conventional psychological and psychotherapeutic practices, which he sees as reinterpretations of ancient spiritual practices. "We keep rediscovering the same things over and over," he says. Brother Embrace is approached by

a glowing young woman in street clothes — the brothers are wearing brown robes — and she calls out to him and he greets her — in character, I guess — with an embrace. "Nice haircut," Brother Embrace tells me, and then he points to his own shaven head: "Never goes out of style."

These guys are with Thich Nhat Hanh's gang down at Plum Village in Thénac, France. Like practically every blue-eyed Buddhist monk I've ever encountered, Brother Spirit gives off just a little whiff of anger, like he resents that the world is so fallen and deep down into the māyā as to require his benevolence. He says that people here are sometimes a little confused by the presence of monks, as though they don't belong. I think of Thomas Merton's insistence that a monastery is not a retreat from the world but the heart of the world, a place where the business of being human gets done in a particularly intense way.

Brother Spirit is happy to talk but gets a little snippy when I write down the name on his name tag: "We don't use that name," he says, apparently a monk with a mouse in his pocket. "That's just the name for the passport." I get it — you have to take a COVID-19 test every single morning to be admitted to the inner ring of power here (the blue zone), and so I don't imagine they're letting French Zen masters register under *noms des moines* when they have perfectly good legal names on their passports. Brother Spirit — you can follow him on Twitter.

Blue-eyed Zen is just the right thing here, because, in much of the Western world, Zen is a religion whose adherents pretend that it is not a religion. Which is, of course, what this whole shindig here in aggressively secular Glasgow is about.

You know you are in the presence of cultists when you come upon a big-ass geodesic dome. The geodesic dome is, in fact, a perfect metaphor for this entire undertaking: The structure is advertised — inaccurately — as the most *efficient* form of building, minimizing the materials necessary to enclose a particular volume. But geodesic domes have long been invested by New Age types with mystical qualities. Buckminster Fuller, the man who popularized the geodesic polyhedron as an architectural motif (and coined the word "geodesic"), took it as central to the spiritual mission of his Edwardsville Religious Center of Southern Illinois University. The geodesic dome housing a miniature Earth, he wrote, provides a "sense of orientation of each human individual within the profound magnificence of Universe." The architect goes on:

> One goes inside to go outside one's self and into the center of the Earth and thence outward to the stars in seconds. The Edwardsville Center becomes at once the cathedral of universal reality and cathedral of universal mystery, in which is simultaneously revealed the macro-dome designing integrity. Whose infinitely inclusive, detailed and tireless concern and competence are overwhelming manifests of the eternal, timeless, cosmically regenerative, love-intellect governance of Universe. Which inherently transcends human comprehension because of the infinitesimally limited locally and myopically over-emphatic experience inventory always inadequately informing human consciousness and reason.

Naturally, there is a big geodesic dome constructed inside the convention hall. Naturally, the people who put it up forswear any mystical or quasi-religious intention. And, naturally, they call themselves the "Eden Project." Pure secularism, straight out of the Bible.

The Eden Project is a Cornish environmental-education charity and, effectively, a theme park, featuring a series of "massive" — their word — geodesic domes built on the site of a former clay mine in Cornwall. They promise an "extraordinary day out where you'll discover the natural world as you've never experienced it before." Which is true, in its way: They have built, among other things, the world's largest indoor rain forest and an enclosed Mediterranean biome in southeastern England, a snow-globe version of "the natural world." They are proud that they have hosted more than 23 million visitors.

Massive structures. Large-scale environmental manipulation. Tens of millions of travelers. I wonder what the carbon footprint of all *that* looks like.

The Eden Project is run by a couple of very nice and entirely earnest-seeming post-hippies who are busy making "Earthling ID" cards for COP26 conventioneers, with examples pasted up on the wall of the geodesic dome: Vladimir Putin, Barack Obama, Boris Johnson, Xi Jinping, all of them stamped "Earthling." Elsewhere, the walls are covered in plaques with little maxims and slogans: "The elements we depend on must become sacred once more. Remember your myths, enact new rituals." Another piece of advice: "Design for other species." There's a psychotic-looking mock crucifix displayed in a plastic reliquary labeled "Who's Who on the Tree of Life: A 3-dimensional diagram

showing the mental adjustment required to accommodate Darwin's ideas concerning nature and man's station in life." Buckminster Fuller was absolutely correct: This is a half-built cathedral for a new religion, one that has rituals and myths and an apocalypse story but no formal name.

These aren't crackpots wearing sandwich-board signs on some San Francisco sidewalk. The Eden Project hosted Queen Elizabeth II and President Joe Biden, along with other world leaders, as part of the G-7 summit last summer. It was the first meeting between the British monarch and the American president. "Are you supposed to be looking as if you're *enjoying* yourself?" the queen wondered aloud as press photographers documented the affair. "Glamorous," the *Tatler* called it. Every cult needs a good marketing plan, and getting in good with the royals has been part of the program since the Christians recruited Constantine in 312 *anno Domini*.

In Qingdao, China, the Eden Project is building a water-themed biome in yet another big geodesic dome, creating a tourist attraction as part of a project that they say will — note the familiar Edenic promise — "restore life," in this case to the site of an abandoned commercial dock. "We're trying to create a story world," says Nathan Mansbridge, a content creator with the Eden Project, "one where people go inside and learn about the carbon cycle, but in a way that is not didactic. They will meet characters, some representing humans — there will be a village in the forest — characters representing agriculture, characters representing industry, characters representing the three parts of the water cycle — spirits, if you like, representing storm, ice, and fresh water." You already know these characters representing

agriculture, industry, water in different forms, etc., though you know them by other names: Demeter, Hephaestus, Poseidon, Boreas. Triune water spirits? Ancient mythology is full of them: the Gorgons, the Graeae.

"We are very much about storytelling," he continues. "And, so, we touch on a lot of different cultures' myths, but we are also looking for myths of the 21st century. One of them is our global nature. As well as all the other identities we may have — faith group, gender, what have you — what we all have in common is the planet that we live on. Our Earthling-ID card is a way of touching on that." Put another way: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Gaia."

"The original name of the Eden Project was chosen because we have this chance to return to a connection with nature," says Sue Hill, the group's founding artistic director. "That's a stronger, more spiritual, more nurturing relationship than the one we have at the moment. So the idea is that though 'Eden' has that Judeo-Christian origin, it's also the idea of the garden that nurtures us and sustains us. That is something that we can respond to. We need that now. Probably more than ever before, we have this sense of distance from nature. We are trying to find ways for people to reconnect with that sense of reverence, awe, and wonder."

Reverence. Awe. Wonder. What does any of this have to do with how many tons of carbon dioxide a million kilowatt-hours of electricity generation produces?

Naturally, there are explicitly religious organizations and figures at work here. Pope Francis sent a statement to COP26 advocating "radical" action, the Aga Khan's

organization is represented, a group of "climate pilgrims" showed up with a banner of the Blessed Virgin holding a tree to her bosom (an image straight out of *The Golden Bough*), Catholic monks brandished plainly pagan placards ("Mother Earth Calls Us"), and Carmelite nuns proclaimed that they were "praying for climate justice." Leaders of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, different Christian churches, and other religious groups signed a joint statement calling for . . . penance and reconciliation, more or less.

In a much-remarked-upon 2003 speech, Michael Crichton insisted that environmentalism had become a full-on religion — and that religion is Christianity repackaged.

> There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called "sustainability." Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment. Just as organic food is its Communion, that pesticide-free wafer that the right people with the right beliefs imbibe.

He was hardly the first or the last to make the observation. Environmentalism as a faith seeks to dominate — or merely to co-opt — the Judeo-Christian tradition in part because most religions work to overthrow or incorporate competitor faiths (which is why the pagan goddess Brigid

shows up undisguised among the Catholic saints and why Christians still do all that pagan fertility-totem-and-tree-worship stuff on the major holidays) but also because the Judeo-Christian account of man's relationship with nature is incompatible with the new faith.

For man to have "*dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" is politically and (ultimately more important) spiritually at odds with the tenets of mystical environmentalism. *Dominion* is a word that the various religious orders within the environmental faith — feminists, anti-capitalists, neo-primitivists — do not want to hear in any context other than a vitriolic denunciation. Darwin is their prophet, because they believe his revelation to have provided a new foundational map of the universe, one that no longer has man at the top, exercising dominion over everything else, but that establishes instead a complex system of interdependencies. That's what that "Who's Who on the Tree of Life" business is really about at heart.

And that may provide some people, especially in the largely post-religious West, a sense of meaning and universal order, a moral yardstick, and a sense of community. Those things are not the essence of a religion, but the auxiliary benefits of religion. It is, in principle, entirely possible to build a dynamic and moral society without religion, but, in practice, it has proved difficult to achieve. It is for that reason that Marxism became the great new religion of the 20th century, while its not terribly distant cousin, environmentalism, has become the most widely shared faith of secular-minded people in the rich countries in the 21st century.

The downside, of course, is that transforming environmentalism into a religion — a religion with creeds, rituals, and *infidels* — has made widespread international cooperation on meaningful environmental goals, including meaningful climate goals, all but impossible. As the graffiti around Glasgow denouncing "climate criminals" and the jeremiads of Greta Thunberg et al. have made perfectly clear, the true-believing environmentalists have very little interest in common ground or a middle ground, insisting instead that "climate justice" requires a complete transformation of both the individual and society.

As politics, that is totalitarianism; as religion, it is fanaticism. And the sweet smell of incense is not enough to mask the stink of it.

Population Bomb Scare

March 17, 2022

Les U. Knight has the gentle voice of an old Oregon hippie. Which is what he is, and he cares deeply about alternative transportation, women's rights, and exterminating all human life on Earth.

Right now, Knight — not his real name; the nom de plume is meant to sound like "Let's Unite" — is very concerned about the need to follow COVID-19 masking protocols, and he is tweeting a bit about that as well as the possibility that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is being secretly encouraged by international arms dealers. But as the founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT, as it styles itself), he is mainly concerned with speciecide, annihilating *Homo sapiens* and leaving behind a planet liberated even from the memory that human beings had once existed.

He is a lunatic, of course, one of those gray madmen who haunt college towns and political conventions. But he is not alone in his crusade, only one of the more colorful and entertaining spokesmen for a view of the world that goes back at least to the 18th century and Thomas Robert Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Like generations of eugenicists, concentration-camp commandants, and pop scholars such as *Population Bomb* author Paul Ehrlich, he describes his project — human

extinction — as "humanitarian.""It seems contradictory, right?" he tells me. "Our unofficial motto is 'May We Live Long and Die Out.' We can go extinct and still have a great life. It's actually a humanitarian idea to voluntarily phase out humanity. There would be no more suffering by anyone."

Knight specifically disclaims any religious inclination — "I have no god," he says. "This isn't about that" — but he constantly resorts to religious thinking, religious argument, and religious concepts. At times, he argues that he is doing God's work — literally: In what serves as a VHEMT manifesto, he writes about the failure of "the Middle Eastern god, Yahweh/Jehovah/Allah." Knight explains:

> Tradition tells how, in prehistoric times, this creator-god realized his mistake in making humans and was going to flush us from the system, but in a weak moment he spared one breeding family. Oops!" He cites the Sumerian version of the great-flood story to reinforce his point, and laments that the "cedars of Lebanon were sacrificed for temples.

His religious enthusiasms run quickly to the grotesque and the horrifying: "Glory to God for abortion providers who catch the zygotes He failed to miscarry."

Knight spends a great deal of time in what can only be described as missionary work, and, of course, he has a conversion story of his own.

"It was a slow process, not an epiphany," he says. "In Oregon, we see a lot of trees getting cut down, big old ones,

and that makes an impression on you. After the Army, I went back to college and joined Zero Population Growth. Their idea was, 'Let's stop at two.' Easy. But I figured it out real quick that that was not going to be enough, due to momentum. *One* more can't be justified." VHEMT doesn't have membership rules per se or an organization to enforce them, but it does expect one thing of its members: to forgo having any children after making their profession of faith. An expecting couple could join, he says, but that child would have to be their last.

Knight says he rejects coercion, but he also calls China's former one-child policy a "tremendous success." He acknowledges Beijing's human-rights abuses but also insists: "They have pulled everybody out of severe poverty, their standard of living has increased tremendously, and they don't have famines anymore." That is true of much of the rest of the world, too, including the many countries that have not enacted population-control policies; Knight pronounces himself "suspicious" of statistics attesting to the radical reduction in worldwide poverty over the past few decades. Like every true believer, he lives by faith.

But his faith produces some strange conundrums. For example, he forswears eugenics on the grounds that it invariably has been allied with racism, which is true, but it is very strange to be bound by concern for the relative well-being of a subpopulation of a species he proposes to eliminate entirely. He says that his movement will leave behind a better world, but never seems to have considered the question: *Better for whom?*

He is, in fact, obviously nonplussed when I put the question to him.

Citing Malthus, he speaks of a concept he calls "overshoot." "There are limits to growth and finite resources," he says. "We went into *overshoot* in the 1970s, meaning that every year we have been using more resources than Earth naturally produces in a year. Overshoot Day this year is July 29, the date when we will have used up as much as the planet can regenerate in one year." This is, from an empirical point of view, hogwash, a purportedly precise calculation of something that is practically incalculable. Professor Robert Richardson, an ecological economist and scholar of sustainability at Michigan State, politely describes this as the nonsense it is ("conceptually flawed and practically unusable in any science or policy context"), but concedes that it is a "compelling concept." A compelling fiction that illustrates some underlying natural or social phenomenon is a *myth*, and the construction and propagation of myths is the business of religion.

Knight very strongly resists the suggestion that he is in the religion business. But he isn't in the ecology business, the economics business, or the policy business, and his great enemy is a competing belief system, which he calls "natalism." Natalism is his Great Satan, while the world's traditional religions — and the modes of life that go along with them — are his Little Satans.

"We have to fight the natalist or pro-natalist society, the cultural conditioning that says 'Baby, good, no baby, bad.' It's very deep. It started perhaps even before we became *Homo sapiens*, where the tribe or the troop increased and this was a good thing almost always: Any tribe that didn't have more members would be overrun by a tribe that did, to the point that natalism became an absolute essential for survival. I think that's why patriarchy began, to enforce natalism."

His imagined end state, a world free of human beings, would represent a return to paradise. Speaking with Alan Weisman, the like-minded author of *The World Without Us* (a 2007 best seller that a *New York Times* reviewer rightly characterized as "religious"), Knight prophesied: "The last humans could enjoy their final sunsets peacefully, knowing they have returned the planet as close as possible to the Garden of Eden."

Eden. Of course. What else?

And there you have it: creation myth, a fall from grace, a pledge to go forth and sin no more, and — always the most popular part — an apocalypse.

The founding text of the modern population-control cult is Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* — a controversial, hastily written, sloppy, error-filled, ridiculous, racist, eugenicist, and forthrightly authoritarian 1968 polemic that also had its origins in a conversion experience. Some Western seekers go to India and find enlightenment; Professor Ehrlich went there and came away hoping to substantially reduce the number of Indians.

> I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time. I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi a couple of years ago. ... The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people. As we moved slowly through the mob, hand horn squawking, the dust, noise, heat, and cooking fires gave the scene a hellish aspect. ... Since that night I've known the feel of overpopulation.

The population density of India in the 1960s, when *The Population Bomb* was written, was somewhere around that of modern-day Switzerland. I lived in Delhi for a period in the 1990s, and it was dirty and hot. It still is. Delhi has many, many more residents today than it did in the 1960s — and the metropolitan area has about the same population

density as Paris. (Different methodologies will produce different results here; some estimates have Delhi a little less dense than Paris, some significantly more. Simply dividing the total metro population by the metro area yields about 21,000 per square kilometer, versus about 20,000 for Paris.) Nobody comes back from Paris complaining of its "hellish aspect." Both cities have their hygienic deficiencies: Paris has a problem with what the French call *pipi sauvage* — "wild peeing" — and so does Delhi. The main differences between Paris and Delhi are that Delhi is a relatively poor city, one that was desperately poor in the 1960s, and that a lot of Dilliwallahs are poor and brown, and their cooking smells funny to parochial Stanford professors.

Professor Ehrlich's revulsion at the poor brown people he encountered in Delhi helped to launch a worldwide phenomenon that was, at heart — and remains — a kind of religious hysteria, entirely disconnected from the facts of worldwide population change and operating in precise opposition to them. The book sold more than 2 million copies, and population control, once a relatively obscure hobby for dystopian futurists and race cranks, became a popular fascination. It is a great testament to the fact that a smart man can write a stupid book.

Never mind that the world's population growth rate began a steady, decades-long decline just as the book was published (it fell by *half* between 1968 and 2018) and that many of the advanced nations are today suffering from crippling population *loss*, "overpopulation" has become an article of faith for the progressive and the enlightened: Bernie Sanders talks up population control, Gloria Steinem insists that "overpopulation is still the biggest

reason for global warming," George Lakoff dwells on "overpopulation," Democratic platforms at the state and local level warn about "overpopulation," Democratic politicians such as Representative Ami Bera of California insist that it is a "national-security issue," Prince Harry worries about it and promises to have no more than two children, Jane Goodall insists that "population growth ... underlies just about every single one of the problems that we've inflicted on the planet" and concludes: "We should be talking about somehow curtailing human population growth."

Those are not long-lost thoughts from the 1960s — this is *contemporary* population hysteria.

Professor Ehrlich offered some robust ideas for curtailing human population growth, including coercion at both the individual and *national* levels. He calls for

> the conscious regulation of the number of human beings to meet the needs, not just of individual families, but of society as a whole. ... We must have population control at home, hopefully through a system of incentives and penalties, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail. We must use our political power to push other countries into programs which combine agricultural development and population control. . . . Latin American politicians have accused the United States of attempting to pressure them into population control programs. If only it were true!

Maintaining the religious theme found elsewhere in the population-control discourse, he notes that his views were once considered "heretical" and cites the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as supporting evidence. He blames overpopulation for "rising crime" and, while he advises his acolytes to avoid discussion of eugenics in the interest of making propaganda more effective, he offers a frankly eugenic vision, including a "proper breeding program" to maintain IQ levels if necessary. And then there is this: "Most geneticists feel that if the genetic component of human intelligence is to be manipulated in the future, it is likely to be dealt with biochemically by treating individuals."

He explicitly rejects voluntary family-planning programs as insufficient to the task at hand, comparing them to the "rhythm method" of birth control: "As Vatican roulette is to family planning, so family planning is to population control." He sneers at those who hesitated to endorse his program as "pussyfooting about methodology."

The Population Bomb is full of hilariously off-base predictions, some of which were memorialized in Ehrlich's famous wager with Julian Simon of the Cato Institute, but many more of which have been forgotten. His predictions interact in an amusing way with his crackpot obsessions, which include pesticides, supersonic air travel, and the Catholic Church. "The day may come when the obese people of the world must give up diets, since metabolizing their fat deposits will lead to DDT poisoning. But, on the bright side, it is clear that fewer and fewer people in the world will be obese!"

In both India and China, obesity is at *epidemic* levels by medical reckoning. Everybody gets it wrong from time to

time, but one wonders if Professor Ehrlich — who is as of this writing the Bing Professor of Population Studies, Emeritus, in the department of biology at Stanford University — has ever got it right.

Because every religion hates its competitor religions more than it hates practically anything else, Ehrlich treats the reader to his dim view of various popes (he includes a crude hand-drawn caricature of a man in a mitre) and the Catholic Church at large, meditates on the Second Vatican Council, and offers strategies for recruiting apostate Catholics to his cause and using them to bring around the Vatican. "The Church must" — *must*, he writes, in a sample letter for his acolytes — "affirm that the birth rate must soon be brought into line with the death rate. . . . The Church must recognize and state that all means of birth control are licit." And the Church must put population control above "doctrine, dogma, and canon law."

If Catholics are a hard sell, he expects that schoolteachers will be easier, their natural affection for their students having been tempered by their grim experience with "ghetto children."

The last section of his book might as well be titled "How to Start a Cult," and in it he offers advice for "proselytizing" — his word — "friends and associates." The strategies are amusingly cynical: "Target Is Extreme Conservative: Point out that overpopulation breeds conditions in which communism and 'big government' thrive. ... Target Is Extreme Liberal: Emphasize that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. ... Declare that as long as population continues to grow, this disparity will worsen. Target Is a Deeply Religious Catholic: Quote to target from Dr. M.

H. Mothersill's book *Birth Control and Conscience*." One feels for his poor friends and associates. What else? "Put together a blacklist" — a *blacklist* — "of people, companies, and organizations impeding population control." Call up magazine and newspaper editors and "complain bitterly about any positive treatment of large families. Attack the publicizing of 'mothers of the year' unless they have no more than two children. Request that publications stop carrying any advertising implying by statement or inference that it is socially acceptable to have more than two children. ... [Television] series featuring large families should be assailed. ... [Companies] advertising during offensive television programs should be threatened with a boycott."

Professor Ehrlich made a rookie cult-leader move by placing a specific date on his predictions, which now look ridiculous: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s, the world will undergo famines — hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now. At this late date nothing can be done to prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate."

What's strange is that Professor Ehrlich had his "Paul on the road to Damascus" moment in India, which hadn't had a real famine since 1943, a generation before he wrote *The Population Bomb*. A severe drought in the state of Maharashtra from 1970 to 1973 provided precisely the sort of test case that might have borne out Professor Ehrlich's dire prophecy, but there was no famine — emergency food-aid programs proved sufficient to the task.

There still is no famine in India. The country remains relatively poor and has had persistent challenges related

to hunger, particularly in rural areas. The most recent one came with the country's COVID-19 lockdowns, which put millions of poor people out of work while disrupting the Public Distribution System, the major food-support program, which also has been beset by crippling bureaucracy and maladministration, like much of the rest of Indian official life.

Which is to say, India's remaining hunger problems are almost entirely man-made and *do not result from an inability to produce food*. The same is true in almost every hungry corner of the world.

Professor Ehrlich was entirely confident that India would never be able to produce enough food to feed itself and called the proposition a "fantasy." He cited the American economist Louis Bean, who calculated that India would never be able to produce more than 95 million tons of grain per year. In fact, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization put India's food-grain production at 275 million tons in 2018. More than self-sufficient, India is today the world's largest rice exporter. It is the world's largest milk producer, too. It is a major food exporter, expected to send $50 billion worth of farm goods into world markets this year.

The Malthusian math never works out. India's population was 530 million when *The Population Bomb* was published. Its population today is 1.4 billion, and it is considerably better fed. The country that once was the go-to cautionary tale for the overpopulation cult has a new set of problems: "India May Face a Population Implosion," warns *The Wall Street Journal*.

India is not alone.

Last year, India's fertility rate — the average number of children born to a woman in her lifetime — fell to 2.0, below the replacement rate of 2.1. India is a young country, and so its population likely will continue to grow for another few decades, peaking at 1.6 billion and then falling into decline. China, where population control was implemented with precisely the compulsion Professor Ehrlich suggested, has been below replacement since 1992. Japan has been there since 1957. The papacy may have spooked Professor Ehrlich, but Italy has been there since 1976. Catholic Spain went below replacement by 1985 and saw its population shrink by more than 100,000 in 2020. Catholic Portugal also went negative in 1985 and has seen its population decline by 2 percent in the past decade. Mexico just went negative and its fertility rate is falling by about 1 percent a year. Brazil is well below replacement and has been for years.

The population of Earth is expected to continue growing for about another 40 years and then begin shrinking. Children born today will live in a world in which the problem is not overpopulation — which was never as much of a genuine economic problem as it was white intellectuals' visceral revulsion at the teeming poor of the global south — but destabilizing population decline.

Longer life spans and a declining birth rate mean aging populations. By 2035, the United States will have more people over 65 than people under 18 — more retirees than children. Many European countries are in the same situation. The graying West looks fearfully to Japan — itself a byword for overpopulation in the early 20th century — where crashing fertility threatens government finances, the economy, and the social order at large. Japan's population

is expected to shrink by 40 million by 2065. And the robots upon which it is pinning hopes for its "silver economy" — robots to care for the elderly and replace workers who were never born — highlight one of the many shortcomings of the Malthusian analysis: Upwardly mobile societies may consume more corn and gasoline and other physical *goods*, but mature wealthy societies consume more *labor* in the form of services. All of those people whom the overpopulation cultists considered nothing more than mouths to feed are also hands to work — people, as it turns out, are *assets*, not *liabilities*.

Nowhere in the world today is that more obvious than in Japan, where the aging workforce has undercut both output and innovation. The manufacturing exports that once were Japan's economic engine are in decline as a share of global exports. Its gross domestic savings are in decline. Investment as a share of GDP is in decline. So is return on investment, thanks to the declining workforce. The International Monetary Fund estimates that Japan's economic growth rate will decline by almost 1 percent a year for the foreseeable future *exclusively* as a result of its demographic situation. "A rapidly shrinking and ageing population and labor force constitute severe demographic headwinds to future productivity and growth, with official projections anticipating that Japan's population will decline by just over 25 percent in the next 40 years," the IMF reports. "Weak growth and inflation prospects, together with growing age-related government spending, pose serious challenges to fiscal prospects as well."

The European Union is looking at much the same situation in its near future. U.S. population growth flatlined

in the past decade, the Census Bureau reports. The Social Security Office of Policy already is talking about being forced to reduce benefits because of demographic pressure. The story is the same across practically all of the high-income nations and many of the middle- and low-income nations. Two-thirds of the world's people live in countries with below-replacement fertility rates.

It is a testament to the power of mythmaking — and the power of apocalyptic hysteria — that we have spent the better part of a century feverishly working to solve a problem that not only isn't a problem but that is, in fact, the opposite of the problem we actually have. For decades, all the best minds, professional intellectuals, and enlightened do-gooders have been in the grip of pseudoscience and superstition.

There is a population bomb on the way, but it is not the one they promised.

The Nuclear Heresy

July 28, 2022

If nuclear power did not already exist and someone invented it in 2022, that inventor would almost certainly win a Nobel prize — and would be hailed as the greatest environmental champion of his time, and one of the greatest servants of humanity in history.

But nuclear energy already exists — and the environmentalists who should be its most committed and energetic advocates positively hate it.

Mostly.

Which is kind of weird, but not unexpected — once you understand the daft, quasi-mystical underlying cultural politics. The foundering of U.S. nuclear power for a generation — from the 1980s until right about . . . *now*, really — is a story of missed opportunities: economic, geopolitical, and environmental. But there are welcome signs of a gradual enlightenment under way.

Start in Europe, where even the goofiest kind of Cold War–hangover politics has not stopped France from generating the overwhelming share of its electricity (about 75 percent) with nuclear power, while Emmanuel Macron, with a wary eye on Moscow, has announced plans for more.

But everybody knows about that already.

In the unlikely event that you are not up on the comings and goings of minority political parties in Finland: This

summer brought an interesting piece of news. The Vihreät De Gröna (Green League) — Finland's junior partner in the country's current five-party coalition government — has amended its manifesto to include an endorsement of nuclear power. It was the first European green party to do so, and the vote on the question wasn't particularly close. Finnish public opinion has shifted strongly in favor of nuclear power since Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's continued weaponization of the energy trade, with only 18 percent of Finns opposed to expanding nuclear power — down from 42 percent opposition in 2011 in the immediate aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. Similar shifts in opinion have occurred in much of the rest of Europe.

The Finnish greens have in mind an ambitious nuclear program. Not only would it extend the licenses of existing nuclear power plants and replace a planned gas-fired plant — recently scrapped because it would have relied on a Russian state-owned supplier — with a new nuclear facility. More important, the program would streamline the cumbrous and time-consuming licensing system for "small modular reactors" (SMRs), innovative new plants that would bring nuclear power out of the 1970s and into the 21st century.

This is in vivid contrast to green parties elsewhere in Europe, notably in Germany, where Green Party leader Annalena Baerbock, who currently serves as foreign minister, has been put in the ridiculous position of responding to Moscow's aggression by preparing to reactivate coal-fired power plants as an "emergency reserve." Even as Germans and their allies in the European Union prepare for a complete shutoff of Russian gas, Berlin has stuck to

the decision — catastrophically wrongheaded on economic, security, and environmental grounds — to shutter three of its six remaining nuclear plants in January of 2022, while planning to take the last three offline by the end of the year. Germany — which is, bear in mind, a country officially committed to achieving 100 percent decarbonization in its electricity industry by 2050 — is firing up coal plants, and the country's leading scientific and government authorities are planning to ration energy consumption for home heating while pleading, helplessly, that "less energy must be used overall," as public broadcaster Deutsche Welle put it.

If France can muster the technical means to run a safe and effective nuclear program, then Germany can, too. This is undeniably a policy problem, not a scientific or economic problem.

It is a choice — the wrong choice.

Sometimes, it is easier to spot the bad decision making when it is someplace else. But while the United States happily is not in a European condition of energy scarcity — thanks, fracking! — Americans, too, are suffering from high energy prices and volatile global energy markets, and we are far from insulated against the Kremlin's war by proxy in the energy markets. And though our Green Party is a political nonentity (the Greens and the Socialist Party USA linked up for a joint "ecosocialist" 2020 presidential ticket and commanded all of 0.2 percent of the nationwide vote), we do have a Democratic Party full of Green New Dealers who spent much of July trying to bully President Joe Biden into declaring a "climate emergency" and imposing a sweeping new environmental policy by diktat. It is far from a dead issue in the United States.

U.S. regulators and industry groups have made some progress toward deploying modern nuclear power. In 2020, NuScale became the first company to receive the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's blessing for a new SMR design, the first of which is planned for use at the Idaho National Laboratory in 2030. But there is a great wide gulf to cross between the plan on paper and new power coming into the market, and the fact is that very little new nuclear power has been brought online since the Three Mile Island–era collapse of the nuclear industry in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The politics aren't great: Almost half of Americans tell Gallup that they are opposed to nuclear power. While the Democratic Party did take the welcome step of modernizing its platform in 2020 to endorse nuclear power for the first time in 50 years — along with "all zero-carbon technologies" — a decisive majority of Democrats oppose it, as do a large number of influential activists. Young Americans are more likely to oppose it than are older Americans. Democratic figures such as Governor Gavin Newsom and Senator Dianne Feinstein, who are currently working to keep the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant that provides 10 percent of California's electricity from going offline, as scheduled in 2025, remain outliers in their party. The Biden administration has made some faint sounds about how nuclear power is "a very big part, potentially," of its climate goals, and it has committed $14 million to a feasibility study for a potential new small modular reactor . . . in *Romania* . . . but, at home, the full-time green lobby remains largely resistant.

Democrats, environmental activists, and young people: The very ones who say they are most worried about climate

change are the most opposed to the one technology that can plausibly do something about climate change.

What gives?

Maybe I'm wrong about that hypothetical contemporary inventor of nuclear power. Maybe he wouldn't get a Nobel prize or be hailed as a hero. Mark Lynas has his doubts.

Lynas, a climate-change writer and pro-nuclear climate campaigner based in the United Kingdom, tells a depressing story. "I ask people to imagine that there's a magic carbon fairy that could wave a wand and make the whole global-warming problem disappear straightaway. I ask: How many of you would want to wave that wand? And out of an audience of a couple of hundred, the number of hands that go up are only in the single figures. In some ways, nuclear *is* that magic carbon fairy wand. But people don't want to solve the problem — they want to do something else. The people who are obsessed with climate change and say it's the Number One issue in the world have a lot more on their agenda than carbon emissions."

Lynas, who has been a visiting fellow at Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and who serves as a climate adviser to the president of the Maldives, is encouraged by the recent news — that nuclear power has made even the slightest inroads with European greens was "previously unthinkable," he says. "I've been campaigning as a pro-nuclear green for a long time, and I don't feel isolated anymore, particularly given the geopolitical situation with Ukraine." Closing down nuclear plants in Germany, on the other hand, "looks mad." In his view, the argument is not a particularly difficult one: "People have to realize that nuclear is the only zero-carbon source we've got that

works everywhere all the time. We all know that wind and solar are intermittent, that hydro you can only build in the mountains." Nuclear doesn't have those disadvantages, and it offers one critical geopolitical advantage. "With nuclear, you can stockpile fuel so that you have energy security for years at a time, without worrying about Middle Eastern despots and Russian dictators."

While U.S. greens talk about "ecosocialism," Lynas is an advocate of what he calls "ecomodernism," which he describes in a *Guardian* essay as "an attempt to transcend some of the political polarisation in current environment debates with a recognition that human ingenuity and technological innovation offer immense promise in tackling ecological challenges." The ecomodernists hope that tools such as nuclear power and genetic engineering will minimize the human footprint in the natural world — not a neo-primitivist return to Eden but a science-driven "decoupling."

In the course of trying to launch a new environmental movement for people who take climate change seriously but accept that it is safe to eat GMO foods, he has, naturally, set himself up for abuse from both sides of the political spectrum: from a climate-skeptical Right that wants to use ecomodernism as a cat's-paw against the mainstream environmental movement, and by a Left that derides ecomodernism as a do-nothing dodge.

American conservatives for the most part do not put climate change at the top of their to-do lists — and a nontrivial share of conservatives believe that it is a hoax — but much of the case for nuclear is the same as the case for unleashing the rest of our country's rich energy resources:

Inexpensive, reliable energy is good for the rest of the economy, and it confers upon those who enjoy it critical geopolitical advantages. At the level of gross political calculation, you would think that the Right would jump on it, because taking up nuclear power as a climate policy gives Republicans an opportunity to blunt Democrats' overwhelming advantage on an issue that resonates more strongly among independent voters, younger voters, female voters, and college-educated voters — demographics with which the GOP has, to put it gently, room for improvement.

In reality, there are two environmental movements. One of them views environmental problems as an opportunity for problem-solving, and the other views them as an occasion for moral improvement.

For the latter faction — for practitioners not of environmentalism but of environmental piety — the question is not one of economic trade-offs, technological development, or policy innovation. It is one of *sin*.

And the nuclear power people — with all their talk of being green and clean — are, from that point of view, *heretics*.

In the theology of environmental piety, the original sin is *consumerism*. And, for that reason, the environmentalism is based on limiting or eliminating consumption of various kinds: Don't use straws, don't eat meat, don't own a car . . . and don't have children.

One of the great advocates of not having children is *Population Bomb* author Paul Ehrlich, who has been wrong in practically every prediction he has ever made but still holds the status of a prophet among many environmentalists. Ehrlich is definitely among those who would not want the

carbon fairy to wave her magic wand, having famously observed: "Giving society cheap, abundant energy at this point would be the moral equivalent of giving an idiot child a machine gun."

A remarkable bit of history that has been forgotten, perhaps studiously forgotten: In the 1960s and 1970s, environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and progressive champions including Ralph Nader campaigned in favor of fossil fuels — as an alternative to nuclear energy. As Michael Shellenberger told the tale in his 2017 address to the American Nuclear Society, Nader at one time assured his allies that "we have a far greater amount of fossil fuels in this country than we're owning up to," and that nuclear was unnecessary given our access to "tar sands, oil out of shale, methane in coal beds," and the like — all the stuff that today's environmentalists want to keep in the ground.

Shellenberger further noted that a Sierra Club adviser went as far as to contemplate *doubling* the amount of coal being mined to keep nuclear power at bay. In the 1970s, nuclear power wasn't seen as a potential solution to a climate problem nobody was talking about yet — it was a tool of capitalism, militarism, and imperialism, at least in the eyes of the Left.

"Nuclear weapons are the origins of it," Lynas says. "We used to talk about beating our swords into plowshares, but they have stopped campaigning against weapons and started campaigning against reactors — stopped campaigning against swords and started campaigning against plowshares. Who campaigns against nuclear weapons now? Not Greenpeace. And it's not like the issue went away — we are closer to nuclear Armageddon now

than at any point since the Cuban missile crisis."

The activist class has indeed moved on from swords to plowshares. In November, I attended the United Nations' big climate confab — COP 26, in Glasgow — with my colleagues at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a market-oriented think tank and the institutional home of Myron Ebell, a leading critic of "global warming alarmism" and "energy-rationing policies," as his bio puts it. You'd think that the conservative magazine writer and the libertarian wonks from the home of global capitalism would be the least popular people at COP 26 — which, as I reported at the time, was much more a tent-revival meeting than a policy discussion — but an invisible cordon was instead drawn around the delegation from the U.S. nuclear power activists. As one of them told me, practically the only people who spoke to them at all were either curious journalists or angry eco-mystics lecturing them that they didn't belong there. In fact, most of the nuclear power groups that applied for credentials were rejected, while the meeting was thick with activists making not exactly plausible claims that the world's climate challenges could be solved by reverting to Stone Age "indigenous peoples'" technologies.

Nuclear power is exactly the sort of solution that the quasi-religious faction within the environmental movement doesn't want to see succeed. And so you will hear anti-nuclear activists charge that nuclear power is too expensive to provide a sustainable alternative — while, as Shellenberger pointed out, the Sierra Club and other groups worked programmatically to raise regulatory costs for nuclear power in order to make it more expensive. He quoted from an old internal Sierra Club communiqué:

"Our campaign stressing the hazards of nuclear power will supply a rationale for increasing regulation... and add to the cost of the industry."

The people banging bongos outside of U.N. meetings are a very loud — for years, the loudest — voice in the conversation, but they aren't the only voice. There is another discussion under way, as former Department of Energy executive John Kotek of the Nuclear Energy Institute observes.

"It's fascinating to me that there seem to be two different conversations going on," he says. "In some quarters, particularly those focused on renewables as alternatives to nuclear, conversations that have come from a nuclear-critical perspective, you don't hear much about nuclear as a solution to the carbon/climate challenge. But if you look at utilities and their planning, nuclear is very much a part of the decarbonization conversation. That's because the utilities and the PUCs have to do the math and bear the responsibility for ensuring that a carbon-free system is not only clean but also reliable and affordable."

And that, even more than fanatical religious opposition, is the immediate pressing challenge for the nuclear industry.

The nuclear industry has a reputation for not finishing things on time or on budget. More often, the story is one of years of delay and expenses that run into multiples of the original estimates. Part of that is a knowledge problem: If you are a production homebuilder who puts up 25,000 slightly different versions of the same two or three basic designs every year, then your crews get really, really good at building those houses. If you are the U.S. nuclear power industry — which in its recent history has undertaken only

one or two major projects every couple of decades — then you don't benefit from that kind of knowledge-building: In effect, every plant is a prototype.

Kotek and his Nuclear Energy Institute colleagues hope that the industry is turning the page. The aforementioned SMRs — "small modular reactors" — are, as the name implies, smaller than traditional reactors and modular in that they can be chained together in various configurations to fit different situations. The advantage of this, Kotek says, is that workers and managers can build a more functional knowledge base through repetition, and that much of the most difficult work can be done in a factory setting rather than on site. "The new designs should be very conducive to pushing down this cost and learning curve faster than has been the case. We have simpler designs that rely on gravity and natural heat convection rather than pumps and valves to make the plants work." The new designs are also safer than the old ones, he says. And that may be true, but what everybody seems to forget is that the big story in the worst nuclear power disaster in U.S. history — Three Mile Island — is that everything *worked*, and nobody got hurt.

Those who are looking for a more economically intelligent alternative to utopian Green New Deal thinking are generally friendly to nuclear, but what the nuclear power industry wants for itself is not free-market policy designed by Milton Friedman: They want the same sweet deal that wind and solar have received, more or less. As things stand, it is less expensive to bring new solar online than new coal, but, given the various thumbs on various scales, that isn't *exactly* a 100 percent free-market outcome. "Wind and solar didn't get cheap all by themselves," Kotek says. "We had

federal and private investments in the technology itself, and then they were backed up by renewable-portfolio standards and tax credits at the federal level. A wind project today may cost a quarter of what it cost a dozen years ago, and solar has seen an even more dramatic price decrease, and that is because we had smart policies that gave the private sector confidence. We haven't used that same tool kit for nuclear in the way that we need to."

Some friends of nuclear hope that we are on the verge of a renaissance. Kotek thinks we are already in it. "We have seen consistent support across administrations going back to the George W. Bush administration at least," he elaborates. He even puts in a good word for that project in Romania: "Once you get into the administration and start running the government, you recognize that having a strong civil nuclear export industry is really helpful — not just for job creation. When you work with another country on a nuclear plant, it's operations, it's safety, it's cybersecurity, it's nonproliferation, and it's a whole bunch of areas in which you want to see the United States setting the global standard and spreading our norms around the world."

In the meantime, the Biden administration is also spending not *millions* of dollars but *billions* to keep aging U.S. nuclear plants from going offline. These plants are well run, Kotek says. But they have not been economically viable during the last many years of very low natural-gas prices, and they haven't been especially competitive vis-à-vis heavily subsidized renewables. But gas prices are volatile, and renewables have significant physical limitations, such as the fact that solar power doesn't work at night. Some of those problems may — may — be mitigated in the future

by means of more-efficient power storage, but that day is not yet here.

The question for environmentalists in the here and now is: Do they want to wave the magic carbon fairy's wand? Because there is a radically low-carbon energy source that is ready to go, right here and right now, and has been for years. What's holding it back?

Mostly fear and superstition.

Afterword

Excellent writing is transformative. Of course, it documents the world. It creates a clear ledger of ideas and how they interact. But its potential is so much greater. We revel in the human connections made by stories, laugh at the absurdities of the human condition, and learn about our own blind spots. When we write on major policy questions, it is to improve the world for ourselves, for others we'll never meet, and for those who will come after us.

More than two years ago, this project was conceived. Its goal was to gain a better understanding of the people, the policy choices, and the institutions of the modern environmental movement. A dominant force in our political life, environmentalism has been called the most successful -ism of the last century. As an avid outdoorsman, I've benefited all my life from clean air and water, the diversity of species in the wild, and a growing awareness of our interplay of how we live and the natural world.

But as a policy entrepreneur, analyst, and advocate, I've also run headlong into pervasive and powerful opposition from people, policies, and institutions who claim to value many of the same things I do. To challenge this dynamic, I decided to turn to fact-driven, on-the-ground, investigative reporting. The goal is to get beyond the polemics that have informed environmental policy over the past half century.

To accomplish that, I turned to Kevin D. Williamson with the outline of a project to train his talents on

environmentalism. In a matter of months, we put the project together. As it wound toward its natural conclusion, what began as a collaboration became a more permanent relationship when Williamson joined CEI as a writer-in-residence late in 2022.

He is among the finest writers of his generation. His commentary, essays, cultural criticism, books, and reporting have secured a place of prominence in American letters and, with good fortune, his career is not even half over. From pamphleteers to muckrakers to the New Journalism of the late 20th century, fact-driven reporting remains central to creating a movement capable of overcoming seemingly intractable misunderstandings. His work, including this monograph, fits neatly in that great American tradition.

The contemporary environmental movement is broken, captured by special interests and ideological warriors. Yet, it is powerful enough to stop many things—the expansion of property rights, technologies, and lifestyles with lower pollution profiles than the status quo, and anything that challenges the deification of *The Environment* as a meta-human ideal. It prophesies apocalypse while turning democratic institutions into mechanisms for wealth transfers to the well-connected.

I believe at the root of this broken nature are bad ideas that can be investigated, exposed, and rebuked by excellent writing.

Ultimately, our environmental law and regulation is not controlled by nameless, faceless bureaucracies, but by real people who hold tight to their ideas about the world. Understanding them and the institutions they support is a crucial step toward changing harmful policies that affect us all.

The Competitive Enterprise Institute has made environmental policy central to its work for nearly four decades. Throughout that time, the hallmarks of our analysis and policy proposals have been conservation, property rights, innovation, sound economics, and always keeping people at the center of the discussion.

The monograph you hold in your hand is as suitable for sharing with the political junkie in your family as with your most disinterested neighbor. While it offers some solutions, it prompts many more questions. It is incisive, sometimes provocative, and a contribution to our civic conversation that I'm proud to have had a small part in producing.

Kent Lassman
President and CEO
Competitive Enterprise Institute
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About the Author, the Contributors, and the Text

Kevin D. Williamson is Writer in Residence at the Competitive Enterprise Institute. He is also the National Correspondent at *The Dispatch*. Previously, he headed a project examining the modern environmental movement, its culture, and advocacy as a visiting investigative writer at CEI.

Williamson's most recent books include *Big White Ghetto: Dead Broke, Stone-Cold Stupid, and High on Rage in the Dank Wooly Wilds of the 'Real America'* and *The Smallest Minority: Independent Thinking in the Age of Mob Politics*. Prior to writing for *The Dispatch*, he was the long time Roving Correspondent for *National Review*. He began his career in journalism at the Bombay, India-based *Indian Express* Newspaper Group and worked in the newspaper business in Texas, Pennsylvania, and Colorado.

In addition to *National Review,* Williamson's work has appeared in the *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal* and other national publications.

Daniel Hannan was a Member of the European Parliament, representing South East England, from 1999 to 2020. He is the founding president of the Initiative for Free Trade.

Kent Lassman is president and chief executive officer of the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

Three chapters in this book – "Myths of the 21st Century," "Population Bomb Scare," and "The Nuclear Heresy" – were adopted from their original publication in *National Review*.