

# **Parable of Environmental Kudzu**

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## **Introduction**

“Green is used for its symbolism of our growth in Christ. Green, in a sense, is a neutral color. . .” so says the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Most Christians agree green symbolizes the renewal of vegetation and the promise of new life. You may be surprised that for more than half the year in many Protestant and Catholic churches green is the liturgical color. It is the color of 'ordinary time'. In sum, green has a rich and honorable tradition in Christianity.

However, many of our friends fear that as green becomes the Green of Gaia it no longer has a neutral sheen. Rather, they see environmentalism as the kudzu invader of Christianity throughout the western world.

Nearly every religious denomination has increased its environmental stewardship commitment and initiated 'Green' programs in the last few decades. A growing number of religious groups view environmental stewardship as an important religious obligation, indeed, one central to mankind's purpose.

Given the above, an optimist would assume growing complementarities between Christianity and environmentalism. However, there is considerable evidence that for many people, especially the highly educated and well off, environmentalism has become a substitute for religion.

This, we suggest, is a fundamental challenge to American Christians. We hope the Parable of Kudzu helps many understand the challenge we all face.

## **Parable of Kudzu**

Kudzu was eagerly introduced to Americans at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. It was first used as an ornamental vine to beautify domestic gardens. Kudzu, especially in the south, grew amazingly well. Not surprisingly, animals discovered kudzu was a food source.

In the 1930s farms were abandoned and left to erode. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, heady with power and excitement, pushed through his New Deal during the first 100 days in office. One of these programs was the Soil Erosion Service (SES). The SES determined that kudzu was a perfect crop to prevent erosion. Their sales pitch went something like this: You simply plant the kudzu, let it grow and grow it will. It will grow while you sleep! When you're ready to plant your regular crops, just plow the kudzu under. You'll be good to go and your soil will be

better than ever.

The Civilian Conservation Corp planted over one hundred million seeds in a 10 year period. Farmers were bribed \$8/acre to plant kudzu on their farms. When all was said and done, over 3 million acres had intentionally been poisoned with kudzu. (US Forest Service)

By 1943 the miracle of kudzu had been whole-heartedly embraced by private citizens across the Southeast. Channing Cope, 'Father of Kudzu' founded the Kudzu Club of America, with an eventual membership of about 20,000 individuals. In the 1940s, numerous kudzu clubs were formed throughout the South, kudzu festivals were held and kudzu queens were crowned.

The dark side of kudzu is that as it grows, it smothers the existing vegetation with a dense canopy, stealing light and killing everything it covers. By the 1950s, kudzu had done its damage, it was recognized as a weed and the government finally quit promoting it.

Estimates of current kudzu infestation range from 2-7 million acres. Kudzu grows too well; vines grow as much as a foot a day during the summer, climbing and clinging to anything they can. Under ideal conditions it can grow sixty feet per year. It is extremely difficult to remove kudzu once it's established, and it only takes a small piece to fall carelessly on the ground for it to take root and take over.

The moral of this parable is that the government jumps headlong into projects, forcing, bribing, and legislating their latest, greatest idea into practice, often without anticipating the negative consequences. Some people benefit, others lose out, but the detrimental effects are often long lasting and widely diffused.

## **Green is a religion**

Is there any doubt that for many people the Green Movement has become a religion? Religions are defined by their cultural systems and worldviews. Religions establish symbols to define their identity and connect to their spirituality. Religions worship a deity of some sort. Religions have narratives and sacred histories to explain where we come from: the origins of life and the universe, sin, disharmony with nature. Religions develop 'laws' or 'preferred lifestyles' as well as 'sins' based on their doctrine. Religions have Utopian dreams or 'ideals'. Many religions have missionaries and evangelists to spread their message and convert others. Religions pass their beliefs, traditions and morals on to their children.

For many in the Green Movement the deity is Gaia, mother earth herself. They worship the creation rather than the Creator. Their sacred texts include Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and E.O. Wilson's *The Creation*. The Green Movement has symbols and practices: recycling, electric cars, and compact fluorescent lights (CFL). Cloth shopping bags are *the* Green accessory. Greens develop food taboos, no farmed salmon, and a bias for organic and locally grown foods. Their list of symbols and practices is ever-changing and sometimes conflictive: is ethanol beneficial in reducing petroleum products, or is it a vast waste of food resources in a hungry world? What about wind farms, are they benefiting us with non-carbon based power or are they disrupting the migratory patterns of birds? Natural gas and low head hydro power have similar contradictories. The answers are often evasive.

All religions have a litany and the Greens have theirs. We are sinners who sully creation. Our materialism wrecks our planet. Things are bad and getting worse because (other) people want the wrong things. Damnation awaits and darkness is nigh. Repent and renounce now, else the end is near. Climate change, or any other “flavor of the month calamity” will ruin our lives and destroy creation.

Deuteronomy warns us of the result, “infections, plagues, war” and more. Economist Bob Nelson observes that contemporary environmentalism predicts much the same due to climate change. The Endangered Species Act is the policy analogue to Noah’s Ark.

For some, the Green Movement’s Utopian dream is a return to a pristine “Garden of Eden” land. Nothing short of absolute equality of all living creatures will do. When sinning - violating nature in whatever form it takes - their repentance may be a type of indulgence called a ‘carbon tax’. The more you pay, the more you can spoil, all guilt free.

The Green Movement is a ‘universal religion.’ Their laws and beliefs are binding for everyone, not just fellow believers. Citizens who don’t accept the Green orthodoxy merit dismissal; they are some combination of evil, venal, and stupid.

Some dispute this use of the word religion, since many people use it to refer to organized and institutional religious belief and practice. Spirituality, in contrast, is often preferred to describe one’s deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences. Spirituality is frequently connected to personal growth and personal place in the world. Many people that have converted to environmentalism, consider themselves to be spiritual rather than religious. Environmentalism offers them a spiritual home, absent the traditional religion label. (Nelson)

### **Religion is passed down.**

People reveal what is important to them in the way they behave and what they pass down to their children. It is through religion people pass on their morals – what they believe to be right and good in the world. It is done consciously through observing traditions and studying doctrine and unconsciously through daily lifestyle. As scripture says: Train the children in the way in which they shall go and when they are old they will not depart from it. Christians do this through their collective actions: attending church services, studying the bible, and partaking of the sacraments. They also act out their beliefs through community service activities like helping at soup kitchens, singing at nursing homes, and supporting missionaries and international aid programs. They teach and expect their children to uphold the 10 Commandments and other biblical principles. Holy days like Christmas are celebrated with children's programs. All of this passes on their moral beliefs.

These activities are mimicked by Greens as they seek to pass on their set of moral values to the next generation. Again, this is done through observation of traditions, formal study and daily activities. Families spend time exploring wilderness areas while public schools and non-profits provide the formal training, teaching the urgency of climate change and environmental crises. Greens partake in the daily rituals of recycling and organic shopping; they adopt wild animals in the same heartfelt way Christians adopt hungry children overseas. The Green high holy day, Earth Day, is celebrated in schools across the North American continent. Their goals are clear. *Green DMV*, a non-profit operating in the Washington D.C. Area says “By

introducing students at a young age to the urgency of the current environmental crisis, we can affect their fundamental attitudes towards the environment and help raise a generation of young people that make protecting the environment a priority and a way of life.”

### **We are not the only ones claiming that Green is a religion.**

Princeton University physicist Freeman Dyson states that environmentalism has become “a worldwide secular religion.”

Historian William Cronon of the University of Wisconsin, the dean of environmental historians, labeled environmentalism a new religion. “[Green] offers a complex series of moral imperatives for ethical action and judges human conduct accordingly.”

Paul Rubin from Emory University sees environmentalism as having creation stories and ideas of original sin. He claims Green offers an identity and a method of understanding the world. “As the world becomes less religious, people can define themselves as being Green rather than being Christian or Jewish.” He finds not temples but other sacred structures on the Emory campus, recycling bins for different sorts of trash. Skeptics are deniers and as such evil sinners.

Robert Nelson of the University of Maryland believes that in the formerly protestant countries of northern Europe environmentalism has become the dominant religious contender. It offers a faith with devout followers, people whose worldviews and lifestyles are shaped by the Green gospel. “. . . it’s Calvinistic asceticism minus God.”

John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, speaks of his desire to go to the ‘high temples’ to ‘worship with nature.’ Joseph Sax, author of *Mountains Without Handrails*, wrote that he and his enlightened consorts are ‘secular prophets, preaching a new message of salvation.’ In the *Voice of the Earth*, Theodore Roszak told us that environmental objectives have a ‘frankly religious character.’

### **Christians Embrace Creation**

Christians often embrace Green theology. It is a very good fit. Biblically, Christianity tells us that we are caretakers, stewards of the land. The land is not ours to do with as we will, it is God’s, and we are to watch over it, keep it safe. It is one of God’s gifts to us and we are responsible for its care. Here is where the conflict arises. How are we to take care of it - what does stewardship mean? Those are the questions Christians struggle with daily. The climate of many Christian denominations, in their quest to be good stewards of God’s creation, is ripe for Green growth.

Environmentalism embraces the Christian myth of the fall, but with a twist: Greens mourn the loss of harmony between man and nature (Gaia), rather than the loss of harmony between man and God. Earth stewardship is one way to put scripture into practice, but it’s only a short step from stewardship to Green. Many Greens believe stewardship means a return to a utopian Garden of Eden. The more radical go so far as to say Gaia would be better off without humans, or at the very least, a limited human population corralled into Planned Urban

Developments.

Nelson says in his essay “It was possible to learn about God through the study of nature because in Christianity until the nineteenth century, it was generally believed that God created the world about 6,000 years ago according to a design in His own mind. It followed that to study nature was to discover a reflection of the mind of God.”

The World Council of Churches (WCC) met in Bali (2007). There they urged a ‘change of paradigm’ in response to the challenge of climate change. “This kind of movement [Green] just does not happen on its own, it must be catalyzed by agents of change. The world faiths could be one of those catalysts,” wrote the WCC. The WCC recognize that Christians are naturally green; they want to be good stewards.

Nelson explains one reason why Green is growing within and replacing Christian Churches: “It is possible that [those being converted] have never examined closely the theological roots and basis for their own environmental thinking and have never seen any need to reconcile the close kinship of environmental creationism and Christian creationism.”

### **Green Religion Infiltrating Christianity**

The Green Movement, at its beginnings, was separate from Christianity. They held themselves apart, now they’ve come to realize forming partnerships with Christian Churches will advance their Green ideology. Wilson and others believe Christian Churches are a good place to drum up business as it were -- a place to find support for their message. By partnering with Christian Churches, eager to show their stewardship and appear compassionate, the Greens will increase their access to money, their population of supporters, their legislative influence and their influence over society at large. (*The Creation*, Wilson). Churches understand how non-profits work and have the community structure to get others to give up their assets. Many Greens see Churches as assets.

The gospel of climate change has generated a movement to unite secular Greens who revere Gaia with Christian followers. A decade ago, Carl Pope of the Sierra Club, suggested it “The environmental movement for the past quarter of a century has made no more profound error than to misunderstand the mission of religion and the churches in preserving the Creation.”

Churches are now weaving Green themes into their bigger picture of missions. Green is becoming part of our corporate secular dialogue, the language and practices seem natural and familiar as they appear inside our churches. It’s no wonder we see recycling boxes next to the food pantry, sustainability gardens planted next to spiritual sanctuaries, light fixtures that have been retrofitted for CFLs, and groups whose purpose is to clean up the roadside, not to study the Bible.

As churches become Green they are encouraged to take their new message out into the community and are told it may be easier to approach someone about the environment than it is to approach them about Christ. Some churches encourage their members to begin evangelism by encouraging their neighbors to recycle, then invite them to church. People are more comfortable talking about the environment than religion. It’s easy and desirable to get that warm fuzzy feeling that comes from feel good symbolism.

When Green creeps in and God goes out, people no longer pray for people's souls, but rather pray for a clean environment. They no longer spread the message of the resurrection; they spread the message of fresh air. Some proponents of Green actively encourage Christians to 'go back to their roots of paganism and heathenism and worship nature again.'" Ralph Metzner from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco writes in *Green Psychology* "While I do not mean to suggest that we must all become pagans and worship the ancient gods again, I do believe that by re-connecting with the nature religion of our ancestors, we can recover something of the imaginal sensitivity and ecological spirituality that is the collective heritage of each of us."

## **Green, the Kudzu Invader**

We see an analogue between the Green displacement of traditional Christianity, a movement strongly influenced by public policies, and the invasion of kudzu.

As the *Parable of Kudzu* shows, kudzu was billed as a wonder plant. Through the SES, the U.S. Government promised kudzu was the solution to the problems of the moment -- the need for cheap, fast growing, reliable forage for livestock. The SES spent a lot of time and money planting kudzu. It took decades and millions of acres of kudzu growing uncontrollably for the experts to change their minds and realize that their wonder plant was really a noxious weed. Millions of dollars were spent on pushing the plant, millions more spent on attempts to eradicate it.

The disaster of Kudzu was fostered by the federal government. As an ornamental vine, kudzu would have spread and eventually caused localized problems, but it was the forcible push of the government that turned kudzu into an environmental disaster. The entire time the government was spreading this weed, they proclaimed they were saving the land; they probably believed it.

Those that promoted kudzu as a miracle plant understood the 'quick growing' habits of kudzu. They believed fast growth was a benefit and most likely didn't give any thought to the ramifications of mass planting all over the South. The farmers, too, embraced kudzu -- they wanted easy 'while you sleep' answers. They were thrilled somebody else (the government) was paying for it. Today, people still want 'easy solutions' -- and they don't mind when others (via the government) pay for it. Cheap and easy solutions aren't the only lure - some follow because they become converts, true believers. It also makes them feel good. They are searching for that ever familiar and satisfying warm fuzzy feel good symbolism.

The great kudzu experiment didn't work out as promised. Kudzu is now considered a Southern ecological disaster, covering roughly 10,000 square miles in the US. That's roughly the size of Massachusetts. In addition to causing deforestation and ruining productive farmland, kudzu snaps telephone poles, weighs down electrical wires and the vast amounts of toxic chemicals used in the attempt to prevent its spread pollutes the land.

Kudzu isn't all evil, though some would have you believe it. It is, indeed, a nutritional plant for livestock, has healing properties, is a good source of green manure, and can be boiled, pickled or stewed for human consumption. It is simply in places that it doesn't belong in

quantities far too large.

It's important to realize the cause of the kudzu catastrophe: the government promoted it. They used their publicity machines and tax money to plant far and above what would have normally been done. If left alone farmers may still have planted kudzu, but they would have planted less and watched it more carefully. They would have planted it where they believed it to be of the best value and then noted how it got out of control and then limited its growth.

In contrast, the government planted kudzu without thought to consequences - they planted based on a few people's ideas and theories. The government stepped aside when kudzu was out of control and did little to clean up the mess.

Is the government is doing it again? It is supporting the spread of a cultural kudzu in the form of Green initiatives. Consider ethanol, wind and solar farms, CFLs, EnergyStar products. While each has its place, some are pushed toward costly applications, to functions for which they will eventually be found inadequate.

### **The government partners with Faith-based groups.**

In January, 2001, President G.W. Bush created the 'Faith-Based and Community Partnership.' Its stated purpose was to use federal funding to strengthen the ability of faith-based and community groups to provide social services to the needy. The program and Bush were aggressively attacked by critics asserting it violated the Establishment Act of the First Amendment by using tax money to fund religion. Americans United vigorously opposed it saying, "the [Bush] administration was bent on eroding the First Amendment, not on helping the nation's less fortunate." The general concern was that the government would end up paying for religion.

After President Obama took office in 2009, he expanded funding for the Partnership and identified several new priorities, including 'Environment and Climate Change.' One headline announced "If the Obama administration has its way, the gospel of climate change will be coming to a pulpit near you!" The headline refers to a report by the *President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships*. The report, "A New Era of Partnerships," March 2010, describes the changes stating that faith-based organizations can play a 'prominent leadership role in influencing policy, education, and action in those [climate change and environmental concerns] areas.'

### **First Amendment issues**

Any discussion centering around the relationship between religion and the government should consider the First Amendment. The First Amendment is usually interpreted to guarantee the freedom to believe and worship as an individual wishes as well as to prevent the government from using its powers and abilities to either establish a religion or to advance one religion over another. There are no Constitutional problems when a person or persons act upon their individual beliefs. The problem arises when the government establishes or supports a religion and/or requires people to act based upon the beliefs of a religion.

As Nelson points out, whether the religion is traditional or secular doesn't matter; specifically he says "defining religion for constitutional and other legal purposes in such a way as to exclude secular religion is not a neutral action. It would effectively give preferential treatment to environmental and other secular 'non-religions' relative to the older and more familiar historic faiths, which would still be required to adhere to a much stricter standard of separation and thus deprived of similar state support."

However, preferential treatment is exactly what we see with the Executive Branch's faith-based partnerships. Tax money has been allocated through ARRA for Green projects and Green education in churches and worship centers, with the caveat that none of it can be used for traditional religious projects within that same church or worship center.

It's not just in worship centers that we find this preferential treatment. Green also gets preferential treatment in public schools as traditional religions are pushed out and Green education is mandated. Students often aren't allowed to express their religious beliefs through artistic expression or clothing choices, but conversely they are required to participate in Green symbolism such as recycling, writing pro-Green essays and more. Christian holidays and symbols are given secular names such as Winter Holiday; at the same time children are forced to partake in Earth Day and other Green celebrations. Christian displays are outlawed; Green field trips are funded.

Courthouses aren't legally allowed to display traditional religious symbols like the Ten Commandments. Judge Roy Moore discovered this when he commissioned a monument of the 10 Commandments for the Montgomery Court House in Alabama. Moore was eventually removed from office along with the monument. However, throughout these same buildings Green symbols are prominently displayed and Greenification of the building is underway.

Bounties are paid for 'invasive species' plant removal on public land. Public Service Announcements advertise clean up days, recycling programs, and CO2 reduction. Green educational material is distributed to public and private schools and school programs literally sing the praises of Gaia and the need to protect her. The government enacts such regulations as ethanol mandates. Billions of dollars are allocated for alternative fuel projects and opportunism abounds. The results are more about cronyism than affordable and sustainable energy. Cities pass zoning ordinances requiring new developments to be built to high environmental standards. City websites across the country tout their ambiguous green projects.

Many local utilities offer incentives for solar heating and water, through rebates and interest free loans. They build popular support through programs such as weatherization programs. One program advertised free weatherization kits for people who attended one of their Green energy presentations. This practice is reminiscent of the oft vilified Salvation Army strategy of providing food for the hungry after requiring them to sit through a sermon.

State and federal assistance comes in the form of grants, loans, and tax incentives. Now, with the implementation of Faith-based Partnerships, the government is offering these programs to and through the churches.

Websites such as Partnership for Sustainable Communities, an inter-agency partnership of HUD, DOT and EPA, tout Green grant opportunities. Had the internet been around in the



early 20th Century how would government websites have promoted kudzu?

Of course, individuals should be allowed to act on their Green ideology just as people in traditional faiths do. They should remain free to recycle, use CFLs and cloth shopping bags, purchase land for conservation, as well as advocate for these policies. The government should still promote and adopt sound policies that are compatible with and perhaps even influenced by Green theology. However, each policy should be looked at in light of the First Amendment. Not every Green initiative is independently a good idea and if the idea isn't sound on its own merits then it shouldn't be enacted. If we base the promotion and adoption of ideas on their merit, we will likely see some of them come up in judicial review – just as we see questions come up regarding traditional religion. It becomes a kudzu invasion when the government mandates and then funds Green initiatives that independently fail economic or legal sense.

Nelson identifies six areas to be examined for the potential First Amendment establishment implications: organic food, recycling of solid waste, creation of wilderness areas, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, ecosystem management of the National Forests, and teaching environmental religion in public schools.

### **Government helps establish the Green Movement**

The government doesn't just support Green religion, the government helped establish it. Government promotion of Green began in the 1970s: the Clean Air (1970) and Clean Water (1972) Acts, National Environmental Policy Act (1970), the Endangered Species Act (1973), and the Wilderness Act (1984). The organizers of the first Earth Day used NYC Mayor Lindsay's office and staff to plan and promote the festivities.

Senator John Culver spoke in favor of the Endangered Species Act on the floor of the Senate during the 1978 renewal debate stating that “we have the ethical and moral responsibility to pass on to future generations, in as pristine a state as possible, what we in turn have inherited.” He told his fellow senators that they were addressing a question of basic religious significance: “Those questions, Mr. President, are very fundamental ones. They go to the nature of our universe. They go to the nature of our ecosystems, and our biosphere. They go to the basic questions of ‘What does it all mean’ and whether one is intellectually and spiritually persuaded that what we experience in life is the result of some divine creation and guiding hand.”

The practice of government support continues to continue. As Nelson wrote after noting that the 41st anniversary of Earth Day coincided with Good Friday in 2011, the Earth Day theme was “‘A Billion Acts of Green’ and we’re asked, like recovering sinners, to reform our ways: take our baths with less water, turn off the lights, spend less time on the computer, watch less TV, reduce our toilet paper consumption, and make a donation.” The EPA observed Earth Day on the National Mall, with 40 exhibits. There were no exhibits on the National Mall observing Good Friday.

### **Conclusion**

We do not argue that eco-friendly actions are necessarily bad policy. Healthy ecosystems, clean air and water are generally desirable – even kudzu has its place. Today the government pushes creation stewardship beyond green to Green. Climate change gives license to force people to live by the Green doctrine. This resembles the blue laws forbidding alcohol, a fundamentalist Christian position.

Too often Green ideas are costly acts of “feel good symbolism.” In a religion that is constrained by First Amendment separation of church and state, feel good symbolism – that warm fuzzy feeling – is OK. However, when that feel good symbolism is supported by tax dollars and imposed on non-believers, it feels less good.

Kudzu isn't inherently evil; it is, indeed, a nutritional plant for livestock, has healing properties, is a good source of green manure. It can be boiled, pickled or stewed for food. It causes major problems in places that it doesn't belong, in quantities too large. Thus for environmentalism; it is not evil in intent or application – unless carried to extreme. We should agree to conserve and protect God's creation. It is the gift that sustains life.

Too much kudzu became an environmental disaster. Too much Green can also cause major problems, especially for the most unfortunate among us. For them it can be a disaster. We should recall that when the government gets involved, it does so under a political calculus. The parable of kudzu offers us warning.

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FREE's mission is to imagine and implement an economic way of thinking that is consistent with a society of free and responsible individuals. Using basic concepts from economics, science, and risk analysis, we explain how the application of these analytic tools can foster sound environmental policies and advance social well-being.

FREE's social entrepreneurship program is designed to explore new institutions and innovative public policies that promote social well-being and environmental progress. Public service is central to FREE's work. FREE helped found and provide initial funding for Warriors & Quiet Waters, an organization that aids the recovery of severely wounded men and women from America's armed forces.

For the past six years, FREE has hosted a series of seminars for religious leaders. The 2012 seminars focused on Butte, America and Yellowstone National Park. We investigate how basic economic principles can help achieve green goals with minimum sacrifice to social welfare, and we explore how a culture that values America's founding ideals, secure property rights, and responsible prosperity, can also foster a healthy environment and promote social justice.