

**Review: Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest
By Thomas R. Dunlap**

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Thomas R. Dunlap. *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*.
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Is environmentalism a religion? It promotes standards of ethical behavior for the morally righteous (who intone the mantra of reduce, reuse, recycle, sometimes with the fervor of a snakehandler speaking in tongues) and it advises that we should stand humble before Creation—even if there may not be a Creator, acknowledging our insignificance in a grand design we can only assume is at work.

In *Faith in Nature*, Thomas Dunlap has written an academic, intellectual history of the (largely Euro-) American environmental movement. His book explores the origins of Euro-American environmentalism, looking at the nexus of scientific materialism and romantic transcendentalism that informed environmentalists like Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson in their work. Dunlap proposes that the environmental movement seeks to resolve the tension between science and religion, “offering material explanations,” as he informs us, “but looking beyond facts towards meaning” (p. 149). The drive toward meaning is what makes environmentalism a religious quest in Dunlap’s estimation. It seeks to use scientific facts in order to mobilize a transformation of society, to save the world. The transformative goal of environmentalism is what makes it religious.

Every movement needs its histories, and in the turn to a religious perspective Dunlap examines a fruitful area for further inquiry in American environmentalism. The book’s discussion of the historical roots of the movement is in-depth, perhaps too much so to those with more than a passing knowledge of the subject. On the other hand, Dunlap’s discussion in the latter half of the book about the penetration of environmental ethics into everyday life is much stronger. He explores the ways in which the idea that nature is sacred, not just a resource, enters public discourse in the latter 20th century through the campaigns of the environmental movement, finding hope in the idea that the movement is changing American culture, even if it has yet to transform it.

In the end Dunlap prescribes the need for an environmental myth to counter the American myth of rugged individualism and the exploitation of nature.

What he offers is sketchy here at best, a redefinition of values away from individuals and towards communities. I agree with a need for such a myth, but the book's focus on canonical Euro-American nature writers like Thoreau, Muir, and Abbey forecloses on a means to articulate this myth. The individualism in this strain of environmental thought may have been countered by engaging more fully with American Indian writers like Vine Deloria, Jr. and ecofeminists like Carolyn Merchant. There is a myth available to describe this transformation, but it will be found in the dialogue between peoples and cultures, not just in one strand of environmental thought.

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